




## Chapter 9

# Lived Experiences of Male Nursing Students at a Higher Education Institution in Gauteng

Bonginkosi Yika 

Faculty of Health Sciences  
University of Johannesburg   
Johannesburg South Africa

### Abstract

**Background:** The nursing profession is female-dominated, leading to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes that can marginalise male nurses. This underrepresentation of male nursing students raises concerns about their experiences and the challenges they face in educational and clinical settings. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of male nursing students at a higher education institution in Gauteng, South Africa, with a focus on how they navigate gender norms. A qualitative, phenomenological research design involving in-depth, unstructured interviews with male nursing students was employed. The participants were recruited from the University of Johannesburg, and thematic analysis was used to identify common experiences and challenges. The findings indicate that male nursing students encounter significant challenges related to societal stereotypes, leading to feelings of isolation and questioning of their career choices. The study highlighted the need for greater awareness and support for male nursing students to address the challenges they face.

**Keywords:** Male nursing students, gender norms, nursing profession, stereotypes, qualitative research, phenomenological study, South Africa, equity in nursing.



## Background

The nursing profession has long been perceived as a female-dominated field, which has led to the reinforcement of gender stereotypes that marginalise male nurses. This gender bias not only affects the professional identity of male nurses but also influences their experiences in educational and clinical settings. Research indicates that male nursing students often face unique challenges, including discrimination, stereotype threat, and feelings of isolation, which can adversely impact their self-esteem and career satisfaction (Turan, Öner & Atasoy, 2021:4; Powers et al., 2018:478). As the demand for diverse nursing professionals increases, understanding the lived experiences of male nursing students becomes crucial for fostering an inclusive environment within the profession.

Despite the growing number of male nursing students, there remains a significant gap in the literature regarding their experiences and the specific challenges they encounter as they navigate gender norms in nursing. The lack of understanding of these experiences can hinder efforts to create equitable educational and professional environments, ultimately affecting retention rates and job satisfaction among male nurses (Bayer & Golbasi, 2021:140; Liu et al., 2022:9). This study seeks to address the following research question: What are the lived experiences of male nursing students at a higher education institution in Gauteng, South Africa, as they navigate gender norms in the nursing profession?

The significance of this study lies in its potential to shed light on the unique challenges faced by male nursing students and to provide evidence-based recommendations for enhancing their experiences. By exploring the lived experiences of these students, this research aims to contribute to the development of strategies that promote equity and inclusivity within nursing education and practice. (Asante, Korsah & Amoako, 2023:4).

## **Methodology**

### **Design**

This study employed a qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive research design and a phenomenological approach to investigate the lived experiences of male nursing students at a higher education institution in Gauteng, South Africa.

### **Sampling**

The study involved purposive sampling to select second- and third-year nursing students enrolled at the University of Johannesburg. A total of four male nursing students were chosen for interviews in the study. To respect their privacy and confidentiality, each participant was given assurance of confidentiality and anonymity. The inclusion criteria required participants to be male students currently pursuing their nursing degrees.

### **Data collection**

In this study, data were collected through unstructured individual interviews, with each interview lasting approximately 30 to 40 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

### **Data analysis**

Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes within the participants' narratives. First, the researcher familiarised himself with the data through repeated readings of the transcripts. Relevant segments of text were then coded, and overarching themes were developed based on the coded data. This process involved reviewing and refining the themes to ensure consistency and coherence, ultimately leading to a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and experiences faced by male nursing students.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical principles were rigorously upheld throughout the study to protect participants and ensure research integrity. Prior to the research, ethical clearance was obtained from the Faculty of Health Sciences' Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg. The study adhered to the principles of respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were fully briefed on the study's purpose and their rights, including the right to withdraw without penalty.

To enhance trustworthiness, several strategies have been employed. Credibility was established through member checking, allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of their experiences. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a detailed audit trail of the research process. Confirmability was addressed by minimising researcher bias through reflexivity, reflecting personal influences on the research. Transferability was enhanced by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants' experiences, enabling readers to assess the applicability of findings to other contexts. Overall, ethical considerations and trustworthiness were integral to conducting the study with respect and academic integrity.

### **Findings**

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews with male nursing students revealed several key themes related to their lived experiences as they navigated gender norms within the nursing profession, and the following themes were formulated.

#### **Theme 1: Gender Norms and Stereotypes**

All the participants initially perceived nursing as a female-dominated profession and encountered societal stereotypes questioning their place in nursing as men. They experienced comments from peers, family, and even professional nurses, reinforcing that nursing is "for females." Despite this, they are determined to challenge these gender norms, focusing on changing perceptions and advocating for the inclusion of male nurses. "I've always seen it as a gender-specific profession, which

was specific to women, not men... I got comments from people thinking I was gay” (P1).

### **Theme 2: Professional Challenges and Coping Mechanisms**

The participants expressed discomfort in performing gender-sensitive procedures, particularly involving female patients, and felt that female nurses should handle specific tasks. To navigate these challenges, they developed coping strategies, such as always involving a female colleague in intimate procedures. Their experiences highlight the professional boundaries they must manage while learning to feel more comfortable in the role. As one of the participants shared, “I’m not used to being exposed to private parts of females... I usually go with another female student nurse to operate what we are doing” (P2).

### **Theme 3: Support Systems and Personal Growth**

Families, mentors, and peers have been crucial in their journeys, providing motivation and guidance. Most of the participants initially lacked a deep passion for nursing but grew to appreciate the profession through practical experience and encouragement from their support networks. This personal growth is reflected in their developing professional identity and increasing comfort in the nursing role, as they see the value of caring for others. One participant noted, “And you know everybody else was very supportive. My parents have been supportive from the get-go... there is the support I get from the educators and then from the hospital. It’s definitely support there” (P4).

### **Theme 4: Personal Motivation and Fulfilment**

Personal values, such as the desire to help and care for others, along with family influences, played a vital role in motivating participants to remain in the profession. Despite societal stereotypes, they found fulfilment in caring for and helping others. This intrinsic drive aligns with recent research emphasising the importance of personal values and fulfilment in nursing job satisfaction and retention. One participant stated, “I think my love for people because I love interacting

with people. So, yeah, I like caring for people, and I like talking to people. So, I think that's what influenced by decision" (P3).

### **Theme 5: Professional Identity and Role Perception**

Most participants initially viewed nursing as a feminine profession and considered some procedures to be gender specific, particularly those involving female patients. This perception led to confusion about their specific roles and tasks within the profession, which impacted their learning and work performance. However, through ongoing reflection and support from their networks, they developed a better understanding of their professional roles. One participant noted, "Like certain tasks are not supposed to be performed by me. Because this is someone that is already in the profession and this is how they do it. And we are sent to the hospital setting to learn from these people" (P1).

### **Demographics of Participants**

The following table presents the demographics of the participants, illustrating their alignment with the inclusion criteria for the study.

<b>Participant ID</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Proficient in English</b>	<b>Ethnic Background</b>
P1	20	2nd Year	Yes	Black
P2	20	2nd Year	Yes	Black
P3	25	3rd Year	Yes	Black
P4	20	2nd Year	Yes	Black

### **Discussion**

The study identified five interrelated themes that encapsulate the lived experiences of male nursing students in Gauteng: Gender Norms and Stereotypes in Nursing, Professional Challenges and Coping Mechanisms, Support Systems and Personal Growth, Personal Motivation and Fulfillment, and Professional Identity and Role Perception.

### **Gender Norms and Stereotypes in Nursing**

The participants frequently encountered societal stereotypes that positioned nursing as a predominantly female profession. This perception not only undermined their legitimacy but also fostered discomfort in clinical settings, particularly during gender-sensitive procedures involving female patients (Prosen, 2022:7). Such stereotypes, as noted by Turan, Öner, and Atasoy (2021:3), often lead patients to prefer female nurses for comfort, further marginalising male students and impacting their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Powers et al., 2018:478).

### **Professional Challenges and Coping Mechanisms**

The discomfort stemming from these gender norms manifested in professional challenges, where participants felt that certain tasks were inappropriate for them. To navigate these challenges, many male nurses sought company from female colleagues during intimate procedures, a strategy that not only provided comfort but also reinforced collaborative practice (Martínez-Morato et al., 2021:8). This coping mechanism highlights the importance of support systems, which are crucial for male nursing students, as they confront the pressures of gender expectations (Mao et al., 2021:12).

### **Support Systems and Personal Growth**

Support from mentors, peers, and family emerged as a vital component in the participants' journeys, facilitating personal growth and a deeper appreciation for the nursing profession. Many participants reported that encouragement from their networks helped them overcome initial doubts about their suitability for nursing, aligning with Lyu et al. (2022:2273), who emphasised the role of support in challenging gender stereotypes. This growth is essential for developing a strong professional identity, as participants began to see their roles in nursing as valuable and necessary.

### **Personal Motivation and Fulfilment**

Despite the challenges posed by societal stereotypes, the participants expressed a profound commitment to patient care, driven by intrinsic motivations such as the desire to help others. This personal fulfilment played a crucial role in their resilience, enabling them to persist in the face of adversity and challenge existing norms (Kuzma & Yingling, 2023:2). The interplay between Personal motivation and support systems illustrate how a nurturing environment can empower male nursing students to redefine their professional identities.

### **Conclusion**

This study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of male nursing students in Gauteng, highlighting the complex interplay of gender norms, professional challenges, and support systems that shape their journeys. These findings reveal that societal stereotypes continue to position nursing as a female-dominated profession, leading to feelings of discomfort and exclusion among male students. However, the presence of robust support systems, including mentors and peers, plays a crucial role in helping these students navigate their challenges and develop a strong professional identity.

Moreover, the intrinsic motivation of male nursing students to provide compassionate care underscores their commitment to the profession, despite the barriers they face. By fostering an inclusive environment that challenges existing stereotypes and promotes gender diversity, the nursing profession can enhance the experiences and retention of male nurses. This study not only emphasises the need for equitable opportunities within nursing education but also calls for ongoing dialogue and initiatives aimed at creating a more supportive and inclusive atmosphere for all nursing professionals. Ultimately, addressing these issues is essential for enriching the nursing field and ensuring that it reflects the diverse society it serves.

## References

- Asante, A.O., Korsah, K.A. & Amoako, C. (2023). Does the gender of nurses matter to patients? A qualitative analysis of gender preferences of patients. *SAGE Open Medicine*, 11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/20503121231182514>.
- Bayer, N. & Golbasi, Z. (2021). Experiences Of Men in Nursing: A Qualitative Study Of Perspectives Of Nurses. *Era's Journal of Medical Research*, 8(2), pp.136–142. <https://doi.org/10.24041/ejmr2021.27>.
- Liu, H.-Y., Han, H.-M., Chao, C.-Y., Chen, H.-F. & Wu, S.-M. (2022). Performative Masculinity: A META-Ethnography of Experiences of Men in Academic and Clinical. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192214813>
- Nursing. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(22), p.14813. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph192214813>
- Lyu, X., Akkadechanunt, T., Soivong, P., Juntasopeepun, P. & Chontawan, R. (2022). A qualitative systematic review on the lived experience of men in nursing. *Nursing Open*, 9(5). <https://doi.org/10.1002/nop2.1269>.
- Powers, K., Herron, E.K., Sheeler, C. & Sain, A. (2018). The Lived Experience of Being a Male Nursing Student: Implications for Student Retention and Success. *Journal of Professional Nursing*, [online] 34(6), pp.475–482. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2018.04.002>
- Turan, Z., Öner, Ö. & Atasoy, I. (2021). Male and female nursing students' opinions about gender and nursing as a career in Turkey: A qualitative study. *Nurse Education in Practice*, [online] 53, p.103078. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2021.103078>.
- Kuzma, E.K. & Yingling, C. (2023) 'Gender diversity in nursing: time to erode the social fallacy of gender norms to create an inclusive nursing workforce', *Evidence-Based Nursing*. <https://doi.org/10.1136/ebnurs-2023-103908>

## 2024 Undergraduate Research Conference

- Mao, A., Cheong, P.L., Van, I.K. & Tam, H.L., (2021). "I am called girl, but that doesn't matter" – perspectives of male nurses regarding gender-related advantages and disadvantages in professional development. *BMC Nursing*, 20(1), p.12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-021-00539-w>
- Martínez-Morato, S., Feijoo-Cid, M., Galbany-Estragués, P., Fernández-Cano, M.I. & Arreciado Marañón, A., (2021). Emotion management and stereotypes about emotions among male nurses: a qualitative study. *BMC Nursing*, 20(1), p.8. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-021-00641-z>
- Prosen, M. (2022) 'Nursing students' perception of gender-defined roles in nursing: a qualitative descriptive study', *BMC Nursing*, 21(104), pp. 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12912-022-00876-4>