



Reflection of clinical practice experience in psychiatric nursing on students' perceptions of psychiatric patients: A metaphor study

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Clinical practice
Mental disorders
Mental health
Metaphor analysis
Nursing students
Psychiatric nursing

ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to explore the changes in nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients following psychiatric nursing clinical practice by using metaphor analysis.

Methods: This qualitative study employed metaphor analysis. The sample comprised 135 final-year nursing students in Türkiye who had successfully completed psychiatric nursing clinical practice during the 2024–2025 academic year, selected through criterion sampling. Inclusion criteria were being a final-year nursing student, completion of psychiatric nursing clinical practice, and voluntary participation. Data were collected using a semi-structured interview form that included metaphor-based prompts addressing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients before and after clinical practice. The data were analyzed using content analysis and reported in accordance with the COREQ checklist.

Results: A total of 135 valid metaphor expressions were analyzed. Two main themes were identified: perceptions of psychiatric patients before clinical practice and perceptions and experiences developed after clinical practice. Prior to clinical practice, students' metaphors reflected fear and insecurity (54.8%), social impact and stigmatization (30.4%), and lack of knowledge and prejudice (14.8%). After clinical practice, students' metaphors shifted toward empathy and the breaking of prejudices (41.5%), therapeutic communication and a humanistic approach (32.6%), and professional awareness regarding the nature of psychiatric illness (25.9%) indicating a clear positive transformation in perceptions.

Conclusions: The findings demonstrate that psychiatric nursing clinical practice plays a critical role in transforming nursing students' negative and stigmatizing perceptions of psychiatric patients into more empathetic, humanistic, and professional perspectives. By revealing this perceptual transformation through metaphor analysis, the study contributes to the literature by highlighting the educational value of clinical practice in reducing stigma and fostering professional awareness in psychiatric nursing education.

Background

Mental disorders, which are increasing day by day and have become a global public health problem (Jack-Ide et al., 2016; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024; Zhang et al., 2021), constitute a significant part of the global disease burden (Jack-Ide et al., 2016). It is reported that 970 million people worldwide lived with mental disorders in 2019, with anxiety and depressive disorders being the most common mental illnesses (WHO, 2025a). The basic burden of mental disorders is measured by years lived with disability (YLD) and disability-adjusted life years (DALY) (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2024). Mental disorders account for 1 in

every 6 years lived with disability worldwide (WHO, 2025a). According to Global Burden of Disease data, depressive disorders ranked second with 56.3 million YLDs and anxiety disorders ranked sixth with 42.5 million YLDs in 2021. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2021, age-standardized DALYs increased by 16.7% for anxiety disorders and 16.4% for depressive disorders (The Lancet Psychiatry, 2024). In Türkiye, depression, which ranked ninth in the Global Burden of Disease estimates of the most important causes of YLDs in 2020, rose to eighth place in 2021 (WHO, 2025b).

The increasing prevalence of mental disorders poses significant challenges for mental health care (Zhang et al., 2021). Nurses, who play

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2026.152075>

Received 15 October 2025; Received in revised form 22 January 2026; Accepted 16 February 2026

Available online 20 February 2026

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a critical role in the prevention, treatment, and rehabilitation of mental disorders (Shen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021), are an important part of the care process (Zhang et al., 2021). The need for mental disorder care also increases the demand for professional nurses in the field of mental health and psychiatric nursing (Aci et al., 2022). Mental health and psychiatric nursing is a specialized field of nursing education, practice, and research that utilizes educational learning, communication techniques, nursing principles, nursing care skills (Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024), and theoretical knowledge from health/social sciences (Alshowkan & Kamel, 2016).

Bachelor's degree nursing students, who are the future health professionals, are the reserve force for psychiatric nursing (Shen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). In our country, skills related to psychiatric nursing are provided within the scope of the Psychiatric Nursing course in undergraduate nursing education (Arslan et al., 2022). This course aims to equip students with various skills, such as the ability to use therapeutic communication skills, perform mental status examinations, and recognize disease symptoms (Altiok & Kizilkaya, 2019). Clinical practice, which is an important part of mental health and psychiatric nursing education (Zhang et al., 2021), is a bridge that prepares students for the role of mental health professionals (Jack-Ide et al., 2016). Clinical practice provides students with the opportunity to gain the competence to trans, skills, and attitudes related to mental disorders into practice (Alshowkan & Kamel, 2016; Choi et al., 2016; Jack-Ide et al., 2016). Students participate in the mental health and psychiatric nursing process through the therapeutic relationship and communication they establish during clinical practice (Choi et al., 2016). Furthermore, the contact established with patients during clinical practice plays an important role in shaping students' attitudes toward mental disorders (Choi et al., 2016; Demir & Ercan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021).

Negative perceptions and stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders are shaped by societal, cultural, and structural factors rather than individual lack of knowledge (Ediz et al., 2024). Mental disorders have been heavily stigmatized throughout history, and stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders continue today (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021; Lien et al., 2021). These stigmatizing attitudes toward these individuals are widespread not only in the general public but also among healthcare professionals and students (Lien et al., 2021). Theoretical knowledge about mental disorders is not a fundamental determinant of attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders (Demir & Ercan, 2018), and changing attitudes and perceptions through theoretical education is not easy (Zhang et al., 2021).

The stigmatization process is reinforced by the association of mental illness in society with dangerousness, unpredictability, and "abnormality," the portrayal of these individuals in media representations as predominantly aggressive or uncontrollable characters, and the transmission of misconceptions about mental illness from generation to generation (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021; Pingani et al., 2016). Within the framework of social learning theory, individuals acquire their attitudes toward mental illness through family, environment, and media; these attitudes can be carried over into the professional education process (Jack-Ide et al., 2016; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Nursing students also undergo a learning process prior to clinical practice that is mostly based on theoretical knowledge but does not involve direct contact with patients; this situation can create a disconnect between theory and clinical reality (Zhang et al., 2021). In this context, psychiatric nursing clinical practice is considered a critical experiential area that allows students to question and transform their pre-existing socially constructed perceptions (Aci et al., 2022; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024; Shen et al., 2023). A meta-analysis study by Lien et al. (2021) determined that education combining social contact is the most effective intervention that can help improve healthcare services provided to individuals with mental disorders and reduce stigma. Numerous studies with nursing students have determined that mental health and psychiatric nursing clinical practice enables reductions in students' stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders (Aci et al., 2022; Demir &

Ercan, 2018; Jack-Ide et al., 2016; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024; Shen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). In clinical practice, the perceptions and attitudes of nursing students, who are the future mental health professionals providing care to individuals with mental disorders, are a factor that can affect the quality of care provided (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021).

Nursing undergraduate education plays an important role in shaping students' attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders (Rodríguez-Almagro et al., 2019). From this perspective, improving nursing undergraduate education and understanding the impact of current education and clinical practice on the attitudes of students in the early stages of their education toward individuals with mental disorders is of vital importance (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021; Rodríguez-Almagro et al., 2019). This study aimed to explore the changes in nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients following psychiatric nursing clinical practice, using metaphor analysis. In line with this objective, the following sub-objectives were addressed:

1. What are students' metaphorical perceptions of psychiatric patients prior to their psychiatric nursing clinical practice experience?
2. What are students' metaphorical perceptions of psychiatric patients after their psychiatric nursing clinical practice experience?

Methods

Study design

This research was conducted using a qualitative research design based on metaphor analysis. This study examined the reflections of clinical practice experience in psychiatric nursing on students' perceptions of psychiatric patients. Metaphor can be defined as the various perceptions that an event or concept evokes in a person (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Metaphors can be used to transform complex and meaningful information obtained in qualitative research into clearly structured patterns (Schmitt, 2005). The authors used the Consolidated Guidelines for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) throughout the study conduct and reporting process (Tong et al., 2007).

Setting and participants

To determine the study group for the research, criterion sampling, one of the purposive sampling techniques, was used. Criterion sampling involves the inclusion of participants who meet specific criteria established by the researchers (Seetharaman, 2016). The study was conducted with final-year nursing students enrolled at a state university located in a province in the Mediterranean region of Türkiye during the 2024–2025 academic year.

The inclusion criteria were: being a final-year nursing student, having successfully completed the psychiatric nursing clinical practice, willingness to participate in the study, and being open to communication. The exclusion criteria were: having speech, hearing, language, or other impairments that hinder communication; participating in the psychiatric nursing clinical practice for less than three weeks; and not agreeing to participate in the study.

A total of 160 students who successfully completed the psychiatric nursing clinical practice were invited to participate in the study, and 135 of them agreed to participate and completed the data collection form in full. The response rate of the study was 84.3%. 80 participants (59.3%) were female, and 55 (40.7%) were male. The mean age of the participants was 22.6 ± 1.2 years.

Data collection

Data were collected between August and September 2025 using the "Semi-Structured Interview Form," which examined how the psychiatric nursing clinical practice experience influenced students' perceptions of

psychiatric patients. The semi-structured interview form is a tool that allows generating questions about specific topics and areas, and this method encompasses every dimension of the research problem (Yildirim & Simsek, 2018). One of the most preferred data collection tools in studies based on metaphor analysis is the semi-structured interview form (Cirik et al., 2023). The form developed by researchers through a review of the literature contains two metaphor questions (Alshowkan & Kamel, 2016; Cirik et al., 2023). Participants were asked to complete the section beginning with the metaphor words:

“Before psychiatric nursing clinical practice, I thought that psychiatric patients were like because.....”

“After psychiatric nursing clinical practice, I think that psychiatric patients are like because.....”

The questions in the interview form are structured to enable participants to express their perceptions through metaphors. The phrases “like” and “because” aim to enable participants to concretize their perceptions through a single image or simile and explain the meaning they attach to this simile. Asking the pre- and post-clinical practice questions separately allowed for a comparative examination of the transformation in perceptions through metaphors.

The research data were collected on a voluntary basis via an online link created using Google Forms. The form link was shared in the community group of students who had successfully completed their psychiatric nursing clinical practice, inviting them to participate in the study. At the beginning of the form, participants were presented with an information text outlining the purpose of the study, that completing the form would take approximately 10–15 min, that answering the questions was voluntary, that they could withdraw from the study at any time, and that all personal information would remain confidential, including from the researchers. To begin answering the questions, participants had to click “I agree to participate” or “I decline to participate” if they did not wish to take part. Informed consent was obtained from participants who proceeded after reading the information form. Each participant was limited to one response. In accordance with confidentiality principles, the responses were transmitted directly from the participants to the researcher's account, and all data will be stored on the principal investigator's laptop for five years.

The data collection process was terminated at the point of data saturation, when no new conceptual content emerged in the students' metaphorical expressions and existing themes began to repeat. During the analysis process, it was observed that the metaphors clustered around similar patterns of meaning and that no new theme or category was needed. This situation was evaluated by the research team as indicating that data saturation had been achieved.

Research team and reflexivity

All three researchers are female. All three members of the research team are faculty members in psychiatric nursing at schools of nursing. Two researchers have a doctorate in psychiatric nursing, and one has a doctorate in nursing. Two researchers have experience working as clinical nurses in hospitals, and all three researchers had training in qualitative research methods.

Although one of the researchers is a faculty member responsible for psychiatric nursing clinical practice, the data collection process was conducted after the students' academic assessment and grading process was completed. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and it was clearly stated that non-participation or withdrawal from the study would not affect the students' academic performance or clinical evaluations. Data were collected through an online and anonymous system where the researchers could not see the students' identity information. The researchers adopted a reflexive attitude, aware of possible power relations, and used a joint evaluation and comparative analysis approach to reduce the impact of individual biases in the data analysis

process. No follow-up interviews were conducted in the study.

Data analysis

In the study, metaphors created by the students were evaluated using document analysis and content analysis techniques. Document analysis, one of the innovative data collection methods, is a technique that facilitates the transfer of data and accelerates analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Content analysis is a technique that involves grouping data under themes and concepts and interpreting them in a clear manner (Yildirim & Simsek, 2018). Content analysis was conducted in five stages: naming, classifying, categorizing, ensuring validity and reliability, and quantifying the data.

In the naming stage, metaphors used by students regarding the reflections of their clinical practice experience in psychiatric nursing on their perceptions of psychiatric patients were listed. If a form did not contain a metaphor, it was not included in the study. In the second stage, the classification stage, the similarities of the metaphors presented by the students were discussed and evaluated. Additionally, in this step, each researcher read and evaluated each metaphor identified by the students separately. Each metaphor topic was analyzed in terms of the source of the metaphor and the relationship between the two, and a list of metaphors was created. In the categorization phase, six different categories were created based on the metaphor list and grouping. The Cohen Kappa coefficient and reliability formula were used in the validity and reliability step.

Validity and reliability

The two most important criteria for ensuring the validity of metaphor studies are the detailed analysis of data and the appropriate categorization of each metaphor (Cirik et al., 2023; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Yildirim & Simsek, 2018). In this study, metaphors in writing techniques were presented through a comprehensive data analysis process. To ensure the reliability of the study, a list consisting of metaphors and categories was prepared and presented to two experts in the first stage. In the second stage, each category was assigned a number, and the experts were asked to write the number of the category they believed the metaphors belonged to next to the metaphors. In the third stage, these comparisons were compared with the researchers' category comparisons. In the fourth stage, after the evaluations of the experts and researchers, the metaphors of consensus and disagreement were determined, and the metaphors of disagreement were discussed again to finalize the categories to which the metaphors belonged.

In the fifth stage, the reliability of the study was determined using the reliability formula ($\text{Reliability} = \frac{\text{agreement/consensus} + \text{disagreement}}{X} \times 100$) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Therefore, 84% or more agreement between expert and researcher evaluations indicates the reliability of the study. If reliability calculations exceed 70%, the research is considered reliable. The reliability of this study was determined to be 84% ($6 / (6 + 1) \times 100$), indicating that this value is sufficient for the study's reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Additionally, the opinions of two teaching staff members were sought regarding whether the metaphors given under different categories represented a conceptual category. The Cohen Kappa coefficient, which reflects the agreement between coders, was calculated and evaluated. Accordingly, the agreement rate in this study was found to be 0.92, indicating a good level of agreement.

Ethical considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical principles. Before starting the research, approval was obtained from the X University Faculty of Medicine Research Ethics Committee (dated: 07.03.2025 and numbered: 2025/153) and the study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. All

students participating in the research were informed about the purpose, scope, data collection process, and principles of voluntariness of the study; their informed consent was obtained online.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Participants were explicitly informed that their decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw at any stage would in no way affect their academic performance, clinical evaluations, or course grades. The data collection process was conducted after the academic evaluation and grading process related to the psychiatric nursing clinical practice was completed, aiming to minimize potential power dynamics and perceived pressure.

Data were collected anonymously and online, through a system that prevented researchers from seeing participants' identity information. No personally identifiable information, clinical patient data, or health records were collected in the study. Participants' responses were used solely for research purposes and were not shared with third parties. The collected data were stored in secure digital environments accessible only to the researchers.

The Google Forms platform was used for data collection. Although this platform is not specifically designed for health data and is not HIPAA compliant, the risk to data security is minimal because no clinical patient data or personal health information was collected in this study. Additionally, no technical data that could reveal participants' IP addresses or identities was recorded. This was considered an additional measure to protect data confidentiality and participant privacy.

As one of the researchers is a faculty member responsible for clinical practice in psychiatric nursing, potential conflicts of interest and power relations were carefully addressed from an ethical perspective. In this context, measures were taken such as conducting the data collection process independently of the academic evaluation process, explicitly emphasizing voluntariness, and collecting data anonymously. The researchers adopted a reflexive approach in the data analysis process and used a joint evaluation and comparative analysis method to reduce the impact of possible biases.

Results

This study examined the effect of psychiatric nursing clinical practice on nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients through metaphors. The findings were grouped under two main themes: perceptions before and after clinical practice. Each participant's response was evaluated based on the dominant metaphor, and each participant was classified under only one subtheme. The distribution of metaphors before and after clinical practice is presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Before entering clinical practice, students' metaphors predominantly clustered around fear and insecurity (54.8%), social impact and stigmatization (30.4%), and lack of knowledge and prejudice (14.8%), indicating that their perceptions were largely shaped by fear-based assumptions and socially constructed stigmatizing views (Table 1).

Table 1
Theme 1: nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients before clinical practice.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Example metaphors	n	%
Perceptions before clinical practice	Fear and insecurity	“Dangerous person”	74	54.8
		“Aggressive individual”		
		“Uncontrollable”		
		“Intimidating person”		
	Social impact and stigmatization	“Mad person/Crazy person”	41	30.4
		“Movie character” “Socially excluded individual”		
		“Different person”		
	Lack of knowledge and prejudice	“All the same”	20	14.8
		“Incomprehensible”		
		“Impossible to communicate with”		
“Someone to avoid”				
Total		135	100	

Table 2
Theme 2: nursing students' perceptions and experiences regarding psychiatric patients developed after clinical practice.

Main theme	Sub-themes	Example metaphors	n	%
Perceptions after clinical practice	Empathy and breaking down prejudices	“One of us” “Human being”	56	41.5
		“A person with a life story” “A wounded but strong individual”		
	Therapeutic communication and humanity	“Communicative”	44	32.6
		“Needs support”		
	Professional awareness of the nature of psychiatric illness	“Understandable”	35	25.9
		“Treatable illness”		
		“Cyclical illness”		
		“Like physical illness”		
	“A manageable condition”			
	Total		135	100

In contrast, following clinical practice, a clear transformation in students' perceptions was observed. The metaphors generated after clinical practice were primarily associated with empathy and the breaking of prejudices (41.5%), therapeutic communication and a humanistic approach (32.6%), and professional awareness regarding the nature of psychiatric illness (25.9%) (Table 2).

These findings demonstrate that psychiatric nursing clinical practice played a pivotal role in shifting students' perceptions from fear- and stigma-oriented views toward more empathetic, communicative, and professionally informed perspectives.

Theme 1: nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients before clinical practice

It was observed that nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients prior to clinical practice were predominantly negative, stigmatizing, and fear-based. Three sub-themes were identified within this theme: fear and insecurity, social impact and stigmatization, and lack of knowledge and prejudice.

Sub-theme 1: fear and insecurity

It was determined that the majority of students perceived psychiatric patients as frightening, dangerous, and aggressive individuals before clinical practice. This sub-theme covers 54.8% of all participants (n = 74) (Table 1). Students evaluated the behavior of psychiatric patients as unpredictable, uncontrolled, and potentially threatening to themselves.

These perceptions were mostly associated with the idea that patients could harm themselves or their surroundings. Metaphors such as "dangerous," "aggressive," "uncontrollable," and "should not be approached" were frequently used in the students' statements. Students expressed this situation with the following words:

"I thought they were aggressive and not really in their right minds."

"I thought they were frightening and could harm me."

"Whenever I heard terms like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder throughout my life, I had this image in my mind of killers from movies."

"I thought patients were unapproachable and dangerous."

Another student expressed their fear with these words:

"I always imagined psychiatric patients as people to be feared."

These findings show that prior to clinical practice, students' perceptions of psychiatric patients were largely shaped around themes of threat and insecurity.

Sub-theme 2: social impact and stigmatization

The second sub-theme, social impact and stigmatization, accounted

for 30.4% of participants ($n = 41$) (Table 1). In this sub-theme, it was observed that students' perceptions of psychiatric patients were shaped by society, family, environment, and especially the media.

Students stated that psychiatric patients are often labeled as "crazy," "different," or "excluded from society" and that they internalized this perception before clinical practice. It was particularly noted that exaggerated representations in TV series and films had a strong impact on students' perceptions. Students expressed this situation as follows:

"They were always portrayed as aggressive and frightening in TV series, and I thought so too."

"I thought that psychiatric patients were generally considered 'different' in their personal relationships, work lives, and society due to their mental health issues."

Another student emphasized social labeling:

"I thought it was necessary to stay away from them because they were always portrayed as 'crazy' in society."

These findings reveal that students' perceptions of psychiatric patients prior to clinical practice were significantly shaped by social stigmatization and social learning processes.

Sub-theme 3: lack of knowledge and prejudice

The third sub-theme, lack of knowledge and prejudice, covered 14.8% of participants ($n = 20$) (Table 1). In this sub-theme, students stated that their lack of prior encounter with psychiatric patients and insufficient knowledge determined their perceptions.

Students indicated that they had generalizing and superficial perceptions of psychiatric patients as "all being the same," "incomprehensible," and "difficult to communicate with." Students expressed this situation with the following words:

"I had never seen a psychiatric patient before, so I thought they were all the same."

"I thought that a person with a good education or a good socioeconomic status would not have a mental disorder."

"I thought they were aggressive, exhibited abnormal behavior, and were people I couldn't communicate with."

This sub-theme shows that perceptions prior to clinical practice are fueled not only by fear and stigma, but also by prejudices stemming from a lack of knowledge.

Theme 2: nursing students' perceptions and experiences regarding psychiatric patients developed after clinical practice.

A significant and positive transformation in students' perceptions of psychiatric patients was observed after clinical practice. Post-clinical practice metaphors focused on empathy, communication, a humanistic approach, and professional awareness. Three sub-themes were identified within this theme: empathy and breaking down prejudices, therapeutic communication and a humanistic approach, and professional awareness regarding the nature of psychiatric illnesses.

Sub-theme 1: empathy and breaking prejudices

The most common sub-theme following clinical practice was empathy and breaking down prejudices, encompassing 41.5% of participants ($n = 56$) (Table 2). Students emphasized that as they interacted one-on-one with psychiatric patients in the clinical setting, their previous prejudices were broken down and they began to see patients as "one of us." Listening to patients' life stories and witnessing the traumas they had experienced increased their level of empathy. Students expressed this situation with the following words:

"I realized that they are not just their diagnoses; each has their own unique life story."

"They all had their own unique stories."

"My prejudices against them were broken down, and as we talked, I tried to understand them."

Another student expressed it this way:

"My prejudices were completely broken down; they are no different from us."

These findings show that clinical practice brought about an empathy-based transformation in the students' perceptions of psychiatric patients.

Sub-theme 2: therapeutic communication and humanity

The second sub-theme, therapeutic communication and humanity, comprised 32.6% of participants ($n = 44$) (Table 2). Students stated that communicating with psychiatric patients was much easier than they had thought and that patients needed to be understood, listened to, and cared for.

In this sub-theme, students stated that they observed that with the right approach and empathetic communication, patients became more compliant, calm, and cooperative. Students expressed this situation with the following words:

"They just wanted to be listened to and valued; talking made them feel better."

"When I spoke with them, I realized that my assumptions were incorrect."

"Communicating with them made both them and me feel better."

"I understood that with the right approach, they could be compliant with treatment and happy, and that this was related to the caregivers' approach to the patient."

Another student emphasized the importance of the therapeutic approach as follows:

"When proper communication is established, aggression decreases and the patient becomes more compliant."

These findings reveal that clinical practice develops students' therapeutic communication skills and raises awareness of the importance of a humane approach.

Sub-theme 3: professional awareness of the nature of psychiatric illness

The third sub-theme, professional awareness of the nature of psychiatric illness, covered 25.9% of participants ($n = 35$) (Table 2). In this sub-theme, students stated that they realized psychiatric illnesses are treatable, variable in course, and should be treated like physical illnesses.

Students emphasized that the illness can be episodic, that symptoms can be controlled with treatment and care, and that each patient has different characteristics. Students expressed this awareness as follows:

"I saw that psychiatric illnesses can be treated just like physical illnesses."

"In clinical practice, I realized that the treatment process for psychiatric patients is not limited to medication or behavioral interventions, but also requires providing them with emotional support, showing an empathetic approach, and encouraging their social integration."

"In the clinic, I observed the same patient in vastly different moods on different days; one day they were calm and open to communication, while the next day they could be withdrawn or angry. This experience taught me that the illness is not static and that it has a cyclical and variable course. I understood how important this is in nursing care."

These findings show that clinical practice enables students to gain significant awareness not only emotionally but also in terms of their professional and clinical knowledge.

Overall, the findings reveal that psychiatric nursing clinical practice facilitates a clear shift in students' perceptions of psychiatric patients,

moving from a perspective based on fear and stigma toward an approach grounded in empathy, communication, and professional awareness.

Discussion

This study reveals the transformative effect of psychiatric nursing clinical practice on nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients through metaphors. The findings show that prior to clinical practice, students' perceptions were largely shaped by fear, insecurity, and social stigma; after clinical practice, these perceptions changed significantly toward empathy, therapeutic communication, and professional awareness. This transformation reveals that clinical practice is not merely a process of acquiring knowledge, but also a critical learning experience that reshapes students' emotional, cognitive, and professional attitudes.

The fact that more than half of the students' metaphors (54.8%) focused on the subtheme of fear and insecurity **prior to clinical practice** indicates that psychiatric patients are perceived by students as unpredictable, dangerous, and aggressive individuals. This finding is consistent with studies in the literature reporting that nursing and health sciences students have fear-based perceptions of psychiatric patients (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021; Cha et al., 2020; Lien et al., 2021; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024). A study conducted with Turkish nursing students reported that perceptions and metaphors related to mental illness were generally negative; students associated the illness with concepts of uncertainty, loss of control, helplessness, and harmfulness (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021). A study with Korean nursing students found that students were anxious and cautious before clinical practice in psychiatric nursing, experienced confusion about how to behave, experienced excessive stress and emotional/physical fatigue during their first encounters with patients, and felt alone and helpless (Cha et al., 2020). A study conducted in Iran found that after their first encounters with individuals with mental disorders in the clinic, students likened patients to "sinful" and "punished" individuals, and most students experienced excitement mixed with fear (Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024). It is known that students' perceptions are shaped through media representations, social discourse, and social learning processes rather than direct experience (Pingani et al., 2016). In particular, the frequent portrayal of psychiatric patients as aggressive or uncontrollable characters in TV series and films contributes to the reinforcement of these fear-based perceptions (Cekic & Yuksel, 2021; Lien et al., 2021).

The fact that the subtheme of social influence and stigmatization (30.4%) occupies an important place in preclinical perceptions shows that students' attitudes toward psychiatric patients are not only based on individual lack of knowledge but also fed by socially constructed stigmatizing discourses (Major & O'Brien, 2005). The literature also includes numerous studies reporting that nursing and health sciences students hold stigmatizing/prejudiced attitudes and perceptions toward psychiatric patients (Aci et al., 2022; Demir & Ercan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). A study conducted with Turkish nursing students reported that at the beginning of their clinical practice, students had stigmatizing and negative feelings toward patients, did not feel safe, and were concerned about whether they or their family members had a mental disorder (Demir & Ercan, 2018). A study conducted in China also found that prior to clinical practice, students had negative perceptions of mental disorders and feared and were anxious about individuals with mental disorders (Zhang et al., 2021). Stigma theories emphasize that labeling individuals with mental illness as "different," "abnormal," or "dangerous" increases social distance toward these individuals and perpetuates negative attitudes (Cha et al., 2020; Pingani et al., 2016; Rodríguez-Almagro et al., 2019). In this context, the metaphors developed by students prior to clinical practice clearly reveal that this stigmatizing perspective prevalent in society is carried over into professional education.

After the clinical practice, a significant transformation was observed in the students' perceptions. The fact that the majority of metaphors after the clinical practice focused on the subtheme of

empathy and breaking down prejudices (41.5%) indicates that students began to view psychiatric patients not merely as diagnoses but as individuals with personal life stories. This finding reveals that direct contact with patients and the relationships established in the clinical setting have a powerful effect in terms of questioning and transforming pre-existing prejudices. The evolution of metaphors into expressions such as "one of us," "human being," and "individual with a life story" shows that this transformation has not only a cognitive but also an emotional dimension. Studies also indicate that theoretical education alone is insufficient to change negative attitudes and perceptions toward individuals with mental disorders; direct contact with patients is necessary for the development of positive attitudes and perceptions (Demir & Ercan, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). Numerous studies conducted with nursing students indicate that clinical practice reduces students' stigmatizing attitudes toward individuals with mental disorders (Aci et al., 2022; Demir & Ercan, 2018; Jack-Ide et al., 2016; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024; Shen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021), change their negative beliefs (Ciydem & Avci, 2022; Kucukkoseler & Unal, 2025), and transform their stigmatizing perspectives (Buyukbayram et al., 2020).

The prominence of the therapeutic communication and humanistic approach sub-theme (32.6%) after clinical practice indicates that students realized that effective communication with psychiatric patients is both possible and necessary. It is understood that during the clinical experience process, students observed the positive effects of empathic listening, establishing trust, and a humanistic approach on patient behavior. This finding is consistent with the literature emphasizing that therapeutic communication and trust are fundamental components of psychiatric nursing and supports the indispensable role of clinical practice in the development of these skills. In a study conducted with Turkish nursing students, students stated that after clinical practice, patients did not attack them, behaved like "normal" people, and were not as dangerous as they had thought. The same study found that empathy and therapeutic communication skills developed and, as a result, stigmatization decreased (Demir & Ercan, 2018). A study conducted in Korea reported that after clinical practice, students' perspectives and feelings toward patients completely changed, their negative prejudices decreased, and they established trusting relationships with patients based on love and attachment (Cha et al., 2020). Numerous studies conducted with nursing students have shown that negative perceptions toward individuals with mental disorders changed positively during the clinical practice process through therapeutic communication and empathy-based interactions established with patients (Ciydem & Avci, 2022; Kucukkoseler & Unal, 2025), and that stigmatizing attitudes decrease during this process (Aci et al., 2022; Demir & Ercan, 2018; Jack-Ide et al., 2016; Mansouri & Darvishpour, 2024; Shen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021) and that negative beliefs about mental disorders in general are transformed (Buyukbayram et al., 2020).

The emergence of the sub-theme of professional awareness regarding the nature of psychiatric illnesses (25.9%) indicates that clinical practice deepens students' professional knowledge and perspectives. The fact that students began to define psychiatric illnesses as "treatable," "variable in course," and "manageable like physical illnesses" shows that the fear and uncertainty associated with illness has been replaced by an understanding based on professional knowledge. This awareness can be considered an important gain that can contribute to students providing safer, more conscious, and holistic care in their future nursing roles. A study conducted in China reported that communicating with patients during the clinical practice process positively developed students' perceptions and attitudes and that students experienced personal development and professional maturation (Zhang et al., 2021). In a study conducted with Turkish nursing students, it was determined that psychiatric nursing practice significantly reduced students' beliefs that individuals with mental disorders are dangerous, that treatment and care are difficult, and that mental disorders negatively affect social relationships (Ciydem & Avci, 2022). Another study conducted with

Turkish nursing students also found that psychiatric nursing clinical practice significantly reduced students' beliefs that mental illnesses are dangerous (Kucukkoseler & Unal, 2025). A study conducted in China determined that the experience of clinical practice in a psychiatric clinic provided positive professional experiences such as reducing stigma toward mental disorders, improving communication, and gaining self-confidence (Shen et al., 2023).

The findings of our study show that clinical practice is a fundamental learning area in psychiatric nursing education that reduces stigma and supports professional identity development. The results obtained through metaphor analysis make a unique contribution to the literature by revealing the transformation in students' perceptions. The comparative analysis of perceptions before and after clinical practice distinguishes this study from research that merely describes attitudes and directly demonstrates the transformative effect of clinical experience. Overall, this study reveals that psychiatric nursing clinical practice plays a critical role in transforming students' fear- and stigma-based perceptions of psychiatric patients into an approach based on empathy, communication, and professional awareness. These findings emphasize the importance of strengthening clinical practice in psychiatric nursing education programs and enabling students to establish direct, structured, and supportive interactions with patients.

Limitations and strengths

This study has some limitations. First, the research was conducted with final-year nursing students from a single university, limiting the generalizability of the findings to different universities, education programs, and cultural contexts. Therefore, the results reflect the impact of psychiatric nursing clinical practice on students' perceptions within a specific context.

Second, data were collected via an online platform (Google Forms). Although the data collection process was anonymous and participants' identity information was not recorded, the fact that the platform used was not a HIPAA compliant system designed for health data should be considered a limitation in terms of data security. However, no personally identifiable information was collected in the study, and the data were used solely for research purposes.

Furthermore, the interpretive nature of metaphor analysis also means that the findings are based on the researchers' interpretations. Therefore, the findings have been shaped by the researchers' analytical interpretations, and the thematic structure may differ slightly in analyses conducted by different researchers. To mitigate this limitation, a common evaluation approach was adopted during the analysis process, and the themes were reviewed comparatively by the research team.

Finally, the fact that one of the researchers is a faculty member responsible for the clinical practice of psychiatric nursing carries the risk of creating a potential power relationship. However, measures to mitigate this potential effect were implemented, such as conducting the data collection process after the academic evaluation was completed, emphasizing the principle of voluntary participation, and collecting data anonymously.

Implications for nursing policy and conclusion

This study reveals that psychiatric nursing clinical practice has a significant and transformative effect on nursing students' perceptions of psychiatric patients. It was determined that prior to clinical practice, students' perceptions were largely shaped by fear, insecurity, and social stigma; after clinical practice, these perceptions changed significantly toward empathy, therapeutic communication, a humane approach, and professional awareness regarding the nature of psychiatric illnesses. These findings show that clinical practice is not only an educational component that imparts knowledge, but also a fundamental learning area that supports students' professional attitudes, emotional approaches, and professional identity development.

The results obtained through metaphor analysis reveal this transformation in students' perceptions of psychiatric patients in both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. While stigmatizing and fear-based metaphors were dominant before clinical practice, it was found that metaphors evolved into a human-centered, empathetic, and professionally informed structure after clinical practice. This situation demonstrates that direct interaction with patients and clinical experience enable students to question and reconstruct their pre-existing socially constructed prejudices.

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations can be made:

- The duration and quality of clinical practice in psychiatric nursing education programs should be strengthened. Clinical settings where students can establish direct, structured, and supportive interactions with psychiatric patients should be increased.
- Preparatory work should be planned to make students' existing perceptions and biases visible before clinical practice. Metaphor exercises, reflective writing activities, and group discussions can help students become aware of their perceptions before clinical practice.
- Educational content aimed at developing therapeutic communication and empathy skills should be integrated into clinical practice. It is recommended that supervision and reflection sessions be planned during the clinical process where students can discuss their communication experiences.
- Educational strategies aimed at reducing stigma should be addressed both theoretically and clinically. The treatability of psychiatric disorders, individual differences, and recovery processes should be emphasized through clinical examples.
- In future studies, the transferability of findings can be increased by conducting similar studies at different universities and in different cultural contexts. Additionally, longitudinal designs can be used to assess the sustainability of perception changes following clinical practice.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that psychiatric nursing clinical practice is an effective educational tool for transforming nursing students' fear- and stigma-based perceptions of psychiatric patients. Strengthening and pedagogically structuring clinical practice will significantly contribute to future nurses providing more empathetic, conscious, and holistic mental health care.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Çiçek Ediz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Sevda Uzun:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Berna Aktaş:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

Clinical trial number

Not applicable.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Prior to initiating the research, approval was obtained from the X University Faculty of Medicine Research Ethics Committee (dated: 07.03.2025 and numbered: 2025/153). Participants were informed

about the purpose of the study, that participation and responding to the questions were entirely voluntary, that they could withdraw at any time, and that all personal information would remain confidential, including from the researchers. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki.

Funding

This study was funded by the Scientific Research Projects Coordination Unit of Çukurova University, Turkey under Project ID: 17956 (Project Code: TSA-2025-17956).

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all nursing students who voluntarily participated in this study and sincerely shared their experiences.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.apnu.2026.152075>.

Data availability

All data generated or analyzed during this study are presented in this published article.

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