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Ethics Through Metaphors: A Qualitative Inquiry into Nursing Students' Perceptions

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Abstract

Background: Ethical knowledge and values play a critical role in nursing practice, guiding professional behavior and decision-making in patient care. As the importance of ethics in nursing continues to grow, it is essential to introduce these concepts during undergraduate education, a formative period for professional identity development.

Aim: This study aimed to explore nursing students' metaphorical perceptions of ethics and ethical values.

Methods: This qualitative study was conducted with 100 third-year nursing students at a university in Türkiye between March and June 2025. To explore their perceptions of ethics and ethical values, students were asked to complete the sentence: "Ethics/ethical values is like ....., because ....." The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which involved coding, theme identification, and categorization based on emergent themes.

Results: The mean age of the students in the sample was 20.93±1.37, and 76% of the students were female. Students produced 74 distinct metaphors for ethics and 80 for ethical values. The ethics-related metaphors were grouped into eight categories: guiding, balancing right and wrong, basic necessity, rule-setting, universal, organizing, ensuring transparency, and difficult to attain. Ethical values metaphors were classified into nine categories: sociality, individuality, guidance, importance, meaning-giving, limiting, fundamental, reciprocity, and time-related.

Conclusion: The findings revealed that students held largely positive perceptions of ethics and ethical values, often linking them to personal beliefs. Further research with diverse student groups and healthcare professionals is recommended to enhance understanding of ethical development.

Keywords: Ethical values, ethics, metaphor, nursing

Introduction

Human beings and human life are at the center of healthcare services. Nurses, who play a key role in the provision of these services, are responsible not only for their clinical functions but also for ensuring appropriate, ethical, and safe care for patients and clients. It is expected that nurses act ethically, maintain awareness of moral values, and reflect these values in their practice.[1-3] Awareness of ethical principles and the integration of moral values into care form an essential component of humanistic nursing.[4] In today's complex and changing healthcare environment, nurses require ethical knowledge to manage situations and provide care that is safe, appropriate, lawful, and morally sound. Within the context of care, while continuously seeking answers to the question "What can I do?", nurses must also aim to answer "What should be done?" in alignment with ethical principles and professional values.[5]

The concept of ethics refers to the systematic study of moral values and rules by addressing what is ideal and abstract in a particular situation.[6] Ethics is defined as "the science of morality" and as "the set of behaviors that a professional group is obliged to adhere to".[7] In nursing, an inherently moral profession, the primary purpose of ethics is not only to ensure effective and competent practice but also to determine the best possible approach to caring for patients. Therefore, it is essential for nurses to act in accordance with both professional ethics and ethical values while fulfilling their responsibilities. This is because nursing as a profession is grounded in core professional values, and ethics represents the practical application of these values.[7-9]

Professional values are defined as standards that guide professional behavior, influence moral reasoning, and give meaning and direction to clinical practice.[10] Professional ethical values, which constitute an integral part of the nursing discipline, serve as an ethical framework for evaluating nurses' goals, strategies, and actions. Furthermore, these values act as a resource for addressing nurses' ethical competence in clinical settings and responding to emerging moral concerns in modern healthcare.[7,11] Given the crucial role of ethical knowledge and moral values in patient care, the teaching of ethical concepts and the development of ethical awareness have gained significant importance in nursing education.[4] This awareness should be cultivated during the formative stages of professional education, when professional identity and ethical consciousness begin to take shape. The enhancement of ethical awareness and the ability to handle ethical issues among nursing students can be supported through structured ethics education.[12-15] In Türkiye, regulations published in the Official Gazette, which define the minimum standards for nursing education, emphasize the inclusion of pro-

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fessional ethics as a core subject to ensure that students acquire essential ethical competencies. Accordingly, the aim of professional ethics education is to prepare nursing students to act ethically and responsibly in their future professional roles and to make sound ethical decisions.[16]

Ethical education plays a critical role in enabling nurses and nursing students to recognize ethical issues that may arise in healthcare practice and to strengthen their ability to address these challenges appropriately. Ethical knowledge and moral values serve as guiding tools for nurses when facing ethical issues and contribute to the development of their professional identity.[17] Moreover, possessing ethical awareness supports nurses in fulfilling their professional and social responsibilities. Therefore, it is imperative to educate nurses, starting from the early stages of their professional training, who are capable of identifying ethical problems, developing appropriate solutions, and maintaining accountability in their practice.[13,18] Despite the recognized importance of ethics education, studies indicate that nursing students preparing to enter the profession often lack a comprehensive and deeply internalized understanding of ethical concepts and values.[19,20]

A review of the national and international literature reveals numerous quantitative and qualitative studies examining nursing students' ethical sensitivity, ethical decision-making abilities, approaches to moral issues, and levels of ethical knowledge.[21-27] However, these studies have predominantly focused on measuring outcomes and competencies, providing limited insight into how students conceptualize or perceive the notions of ethics and ethical values themselves.[28] A closer examination of metaphor-based studies in the nursing literature reveals that such research has predominantly focused on concepts such as care, being a nurse, and the nursing profession itself. While metaphors have been widely used to explore professional identity and perceptions of care in nursing, there appears to be no study specifically examining nursing students' metaphoric perceptions of ethics and ethical values.[28-32] This absence is noteworthy, given the central role of ethics and values in nursing practice and education, and indicates a clear gap in the literature that the present study aims to address. Given the increasing significance attributed to ethics education, it is essential to investigate these perceptions in greater depth. In this context, the metaphor method, a qualitative research approach, offers a distinctive opportunity to explore students' implicit understanding and perceptions of abstract concepts such as ethics and values. Qualitative research seeks to examine phenomena that individuals are aware of but do not fully comprehend in depth.[33] Studies employing metaphors aim to describe the various ways in which individuals experience, interpret, and conceptualize a particular aspect of reality.[33,34] Metaphors can reveal insights into unseen dimensions of thought and influence individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes, thereby shaping their actions in real-world contexts. Accordingly, this study aimed to describe the metaphoric perceptions of nursing students toward ethics and ethical values through the use of metaphors.

Study Questions

1. Which metaphors do nursing students use to express their perceptions of the concept of ethics?
2. Which metaphors do nursing students use to express their perceptions of ethical values?

Materials and Methods

Type of Research

Using the unique power of metaphors to explore complex and abstract concepts, this study employed a qualitative approach to reveal how nursing students conceptualize ethics and ethical values. As a qualitative research method, metaphor analysis records, interprets, and analyzes non-numerical data to uncover deeper meanings in human experiences.[33,34]

Population and Sample of the Study

This study was conducted between March and June 2024 using a purposive sampling method. The population consisted of 187 third-year nursing students enrolled in the Nursing Department of the Faculty of Health Sciences at a university in Türkiye, all of whom were taking the Nursing Philosophy and Ethics course in the second semester. Inclusion criteria were being an undergraduate nursing student, being enrolled in the Nursing Philosophy and Ethics course, and volunteering to participate in the study. Exclusion criteria included unwillingness to continue participation, repeating the course, or failing to complete the data collection tools. Of the 187 students, 141 met the inclusion criteria. Nine students were excluded due to the absence of metaphors in the semi-structured form, 20 were absent during data collection, and 12 declined participation. The study was completed with a final sample of 100 students.

Data Collection

Data were collected using a researcher-developed form containing two descriptive questions about participants' age and gender and two metaphor-completion sentences. Participants were asked to complete the sentences "Ethics is like..., because..." and "Ethical values are like..., because..." with appropriate metaphoric expressions. Students were informed about metaphors and given an example before completing the form. They were then asked to express a metaphor reflecting their understanding of ethics and explain its rationale. Completing the form took approximately 5–10 minutes. Metaphors are frequently used in qualitative research to analyze complex data, establish connections among themes, and present findings in a meaningful and comprehensible manner to the reader.

Data Analysis

The sociodemographic characteristics of the participants were analyzed using SPSS software version 23.0 (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Descriptive statistics, including numbers and percentages, were used to present the quantitative data. The metaphors described by the participants were analyzed and interpreted in five stages: naming, classification, categorization, validity–reliability, and quantification of data.

Step 1. Naming

A temporary list of metaphors developed by the students was created in alphabetical order. During this process, six students who did not produce a metaphor were excluded from the study.

Step 2. Classification

The metaphors generated from the phrases "Ethics is like..." and "Ethical values are like..." were examined, and all expressions were systematically listed and analyzed according to their linguistic and conceptual characteristics.

Step 3. Categorization

The metaphorical expressions obtained were grouped into 17 conceptual categories based on thematic similarities and interpretative consistency. The grouping of metaphors was determined by analyzing each participant's explanation in the sentence beginning with "because...". Selected metaphor examples were used as reference points for thematic coding. Each metaphor was examined in terms of the roles and meanings attributed to nurses, and corresponding codes were created. These codes were then articulated in relation to social perceptions of nursing and converted into conceptual category titles.

Step 4. Validity–Reliability

For validity and reliability, the metaphors and categories were independently reviewed by two experts, who assigned each metaphor to a category. The level of agreement between researchers and experts was determined by counting the number of agreements and disagreements. The internal reliability of the study was calculated using Huberman's formula: Reliability = Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement). According to Miles and Huberman (2002), a compatibility rate of 90% or above indicates acceptable reliability. In this study, the reliability coefficient was calculated as 96%, confirming the consistency of the categorization process[31]

Step 5. Data Analysis

All qualitative and quantitative data were transferred to SPSS for further analysis. Qualitative data were analyzed using content analysis, while quantitative data were evaluated using chi-squared tests.

Ethical Considerations

Ethics committee approval was obtained from Social Research Ethics Committee of Izmir Katip Celebi University prior to the conduct of the study (Approval Number: 2023/18-02, Date: 01.11.2023). Written permission was obtained from the institution where the study was conducted. Furthermore, written informed consent was obtained from the students who volunteered to participate in the study, and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki were adhered to throughout the study.

Table 1. Distribution of the metaphors developed by the students for the concept of ethics according to categories

Categories	Metaphors	Number of participants	Number of metaphors
Guiding	Teacher (2), Compass (7), Sun, Pole Star, Angel, Lighthouse, Light (4), Book, Close Friends, Lantern, Pen, Guide (2), Kite with Wings, Light Suddenly Appearing on a Dark Road, Flashlight, Key That Opens the Right Door, Love, Tree, Living Life, Being Reborn and Growing, An Integral Part of Our Life, Destination Board	33	22 (29.7%)
Balance between right and wrong	Morality (4), Inner Happiness and Restlessness, Key-Lock, Predicate, Scales (3), Devil and Angel, Life, Crossroads, Mother, Answer Key, Bridge, Integration of the Heart and Brain, Mature Person, Palace of Justice, Recipe, Mother, Weapon Used in War	22	17 (23.0%)
Basic necessity	Breathing, Water (4), Sun, Organ, Heart, Body, Food, Refrigerator	11	8 (10.8%)
Rule	Traffic Sign (6), Car, Act, Owl, Rules Surrounding Life, Statute	11	7 (9.5%)
Order	Empty Glass, Flower, Painting, God, Family, Matryoshka Doll, Salary, Tree	8	8 (10.8%)
Universality	Oxygen, Life, A Portrait Painted by an Artist, A Language That Everyone Should Know, A Lesson That Every Person Must Take in School, A Single Straight Road Without Ups and Downs	6	6 (8.1%)
Transparency	Water (3), White Color, Light, Glasses	6	4 (5.4%)
Difficult to attain	Stars in the Universe (2), Universe	3	2 (2.7%)
Total		100	74 (100%)

Results

The mean age of the students in the sample was 20.93±1.37, and 76% of the students were female.

Ethics Metaphors and Categories

According to students' statements, 74 different metaphors and eight categories emerged from the analysis of ethics metaphors (Table 1).

Category 1: Guiding

The category of "ethics as a guide" consisted of a total of 22 metaphors (29.7%), developed by 33 students (33.0%). The most frequently mentioned metaphors in this category were compass, light, teacher, sun, and guide (Table 1). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethics is like the pole star, because it becomes our guide when we are lost. Morally, in every situation where you find yourself in trouble, it shows you the right path and acts as a guide.*" (S22, Female)

> "*Ethics is like light, because it illuminates our path to find the right way.*" (S55, Female)

Category 2: Balance Between Right and Wrong

This category had the second-highest number of metaphors after the guiding category. As shown in Table 1, the balance between right and wrong category consisted of 17 metaphors (23.0%) generated by 22 participants. The most frequently mentioned metaphors in this category were morality and scales (Table 1). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethics is like scales, because it allows us to balance good and bad, right and wrong.*" (S76, Female)

> "*Ethics is like an answer key, because it guides a person to the right path and enables them to choose what is right even amidst internal conflicts.*" (S74, Female)

Category 3: Basic Necessity

The category of "ethics as a basic necessity" consisted of a total of eight metaphors (10.8%), developed by 11 students. The most frequently mentioned metaphor in this category was water (Table 1). The students' statements are as follows:

> "*Ethics is like water, because it is the essential element of life. Without it, everything is incomplete and abnormal.*" (S14, Female)

> "*Ethics is like the heart, because we cannot live without ethics just as we cannot live without a heart.*" (S67, Male)

Category 4: Rule

The category of "ethics as a rule" consisted of seven metaphors (9.5%), developed by 11 individuals (11.0%). The traffic sign metaphor in this category was the second most frequently mentioned among all ethics-related metaphors (Table 1). A sample metaphor expression related to the traffic sign is given below:

> "*Ethics is like a traffic sign, because it teaches us in our daily lives, just like traffic lights: to stop where necessary like a red light, to wait and reflect like a yellow light, and to take action like a green light.*" (S72, Male)

> "*Ethics is like an owl, because owls represent wisdom, nobility, attentiveness, goodness, and diligence. In ethics, these are obligations that should be applied equally and fairly in accordance with the legal responsibilities of virtuous, moral, and honorable individuals.*" (S35, Female)

Category 5: Order

The category of "ethics as order" covered a total of eight metaphors (10.8%), developed by eight individuals (4.07%) (Table 1). Two of the students made the following statements:

> "*Ethics is like a painting, because colors are a harmonious blend of organized and suitable arrangements.*" (S97, Male)

> "*Ethics is like God, because existence or absence depends on one's belief. Some believe it should exist and behave accordingly, while others deny it and determine their own values.*" (S7, Female)

Category 6: Universality

The category of "ethics as universality" included a total of six metaphors (8.1%), produced by six individuals (2.4%) (Table 1). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethics is like oxygen, because it is the same in every language and is universal.*" (S6, Female)

> "*Ethics is like a single, straight road with no ups and downs, because ethics cannot be changed; it is what it should be, and it is one.*" (S70, Female)

Category 7: Transparency

As shown in Table 1, the transparency category consisted of four metaphors (5.4%) generated by six participants. The water metaphor was the most frequently cited in this category (Table 1). Two of the students made the following statements:

> "*Ethics is like water, because it cleanses and leads to absolute goodness and transparency.*" (S19, Female)

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Table 2. Distribution of the metaphors developed by the students for the concept of ethical values according to categories

Categories	Value metaphors	Number of participants	Number of metaphors
Individualism	Respect (2), Conscience, Taste in Music, Mortality, Belief, Fingerprint (3), Emotion, Kindliness, Hairstyle, Bag, Canvas, A Member of Our Body, Surrealist Painting, Book (2), Notebook, Half-Full Glass, Tree, Mirror, Inner Voice	23	19 (23.8%)
Guiding	Junction, Bend, Map (2), Compass, Roadmap, Navigation (2), Guide, Father, Order, Childhood, A Road with Inclines and Detours, Sunrise, Light, Eye, Life, Mother, Judge	19	17 (21.3%)
Sociality	Culture (6), Moral Norms, Society, Public, Something That Embodies Our Societal Riches, Homeland, Economy, Rainbow, Forest, Natural Stone, Choosing a Sport Based on Individuals' Body Types and Engaging in That Sport	16	11 (13.8%)
Importance	Jewel, Treasure (2), Diamond, Gold (3), Turkish Lira, Gift, An Item We Cherish, A Scale Found in a Jeweler's Shop	12	8 (10.0%)
Reciprocity	Mirror of the Soul, Iron, Stock Market, Book, Flower (2), Sunflower Changing Its Direction Toward the Sun	7	6 (7.5%)
Limiting	Family (3), House, Politics, Dartboard, Boundary Line	7	5 (6.6%)
Fundamental	Foundation of a Building, Skeleton (2), Heartbeat, Element, Breath	6	5 (6.6%)
Giving meaning to life	Accessory, Women, Honey, Water (2), Art	6	5 (6.6%)
Relational to Time	Time, Tradition Changing Over Time, Lifespan of a Butterfly, Moon	4	4 (5.0%)
Total		100	80 (100%)

> "*Ethics is like the color white, because it remains immaculate while containing all colors (good and bad) within*." (S79, Female)

Category 8: Difficult to Attain

As shown in Table 1, the difficult-to-attain category consisted of two metaphors (2.7%) generated by three participants. The most frequently mentioned metaphor in this category was the "stars in the universe" metaphor (Table 1).

> "*Ethics is like stars in the universe, because reaching and adhering to ethics fully is as challenging as reaching the stars*." (S47, Male)

> "*Ethics is like the universe, because it is infinite*." (S68, Male)

Ethical Values Metaphors and Categories

According to students' statements, 80 different metaphors and nine categories emerged from the analysis of ethical values (Table 2).

Category 1: Individualism

The category of "ethical values as individualism" consisted of a total of 19 metaphors (23.8%), developed by 23 students. The most frequently mentioned metaphors in this category were fingerprint, book, and respect (Table 2). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethical values are like fingerprints, because they are different for each person and unique to her*." (S52, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like a bag, because the reason for everyone's combination is different. It takes on a form according to each shape and person*." (S14, Female)

Category 2: Guiding

The category of "ethical values as guiding" included a total of 17 metaphors (21.3%), produced by 19 individuals. The most frequently mentioned metaphors in this category were map and navigation (Table 2). The students' statements are as follows:

> "*Ethical values are like a map, because it directs us toward our goal and serves as a guide regarding where things are located*." (S40, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like navigation, because it determines the course of our lives*." (S100, Male)

Category 3: Sociality

As shown in Table 2, the transparency category consisted of 11 metaphors (13.8%) generated by 16 students. The culture metaphor was the most frequently cited in this category (Table 1). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethical values are like culture, because cultures vary for everyone and every society, and everyone maintains what they believe to be right (their culture). They originate from the past but are also influenced by the future*." (S7, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like the public, because they reflect society*." (S57, Male)

Category 4: Importance

The category of "ethical values as importance" included a total of eight metaphors (10.0%), produced by 12 individuals. The treasure and gold metaphors were the most frequently cited in this category (Table 2). Some examples of metaphors created by nursing students are as follows:

> "*Ethical values are like treasure, because it is hard to find*." (S62, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like gold, because gold is worthless without being processed; it gains value when it comes to light*." (S41, Female)

Category 5: Reciprocity

The category of "ethical values as reciprocity" covered a total of six metaphors (7.5%), developed by seven participants (Table 2). Two of the students made the following statements:

> "*Ethical values are like a flower, because as it is loved, watered, and cared for, it grows, develops, and emits a pleasant fragrance*." (S17, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like iron, because when values are upheld, that iron shines; if values are not upheld, that iron rusts*." (S87, Male)

Category 6: Limiting

As shown in Table 2, the limiting category consisted of five metaphors (6.6%) generated by seven students. The family metaphor was the most frequently cited in this category (Table 2). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethical values are like family, because they involve acting within certain boundaries*." (S16, Female)

> "*Ethical values are like a house, because it is a whole in which you define your own boundaries and contain the things you love and find meaningful*." (S12, Female)

Category 7: Fundamental

The category of "ethical values as fundamental" consisted of a total of five metaphors (6.6%), developed by six students. The skeleton metaphor was the most frequently cited in this category (Table 2). Sample metaphor expressions related to this category are given below:

> "*Ethical values are like a skeleton, because it keeps us standing*." (S81, Female)

"*Ethical values are like the foundation of a building, because just as a building with an unstable foundation is doomed to collapse, so are people with unstable values*." (S22, Female)

Category 8: Giving Meaning to Life

The giving meaning to life category consisted of five metaphors (6.6%) generated by six students. The water metaphor was the most frequently cited in this category (Table 2). Two of the students made the following statements:

"*Ethical values are like women, because in their absence, life's meaning does not resonate*." (S92, Male)

"*Ethical values are like accessories, because they add color and meaning to our simple lives*." (S76, Female)

Category 9: Relational to Time

The category that generated the fewest metaphors regarding ethical values was the relational-to-time category. In this category, the metaphors of time, tradition changing over time, the lifespan of a butterfly, and the moon were produced by four students (Table 2).

"*Ethical values are like tradition changing over time, because they vary with time*." (S65, Male)

"*Ethical values are like the moon, because just as the moon transitions between crescent and full phases, values also exhibit variability*." (S77, Female)

Discussion

The use of metaphors to make sense of and concretize abstract and complex concepts is a widely employed and powerful research method in the literature.[30] As in every field, ethics and ethical values are two indispensable fundamental concepts in the nursing profession; however, due to their abstract nature, they are often difficult to articulate and comprehend. Therefore, understanding how these abstract concepts are perceived, expressed, and concretized by students forms the starting point of this research.

In our study, the students used 74 different metaphors related to ethics and 80 different metaphors related to ethical values, which were analyzed into eight and nine categories, respectively. The findings were discussed in light of the relevant literature on the concepts of ethics and ethical values. Our study revealed that the majority of the participants used positive metaphors. Thus, it can be stated that students who hold positive mental images of ethics during their education may develop stronger professional ethical values, in line with their statements. Central to understanding how nurses might approach their practice ethically is the idea that nursing education has the potential to foster ethically aware practice that addresses the inevitable uncertainties in complex situations.[33] It has been demonstrated that nurses' practice behaviors are influenced by their professional beliefs and moral values.[18] Therefore, it is critical to understand the ethical beliefs and professional values of nursing students, as this knowledge may be used to guide curricular decisions and instructional practices that build students' professional reflective competencies.

When the metaphors developed by the students about ethics in our study were divided into categories, the "guiding" category, emphasized by approximately one-third of the students, was the most prominent. Students highlighted the guiding role of ethics through metaphors such as teacher, compass, sun, pole star, lighthouse, and lantern, indicating positive and strong perceptions of ethics. Students substantially associated ethics with "guidance," suggesting that they perceived ethics as leading the way in their lives. Additionally, approximately one-fifth of the students used "guiding" metaphors for ethical values as well. These findings also illustrate how students position ethics in their lives. The results are consistent with previous metaphor-based studies conducted with students from different disciplines. In a study conducted with undergraduate child development students, metaphoric perceptions of the concept of ethics were mainly grouped under the categories of protection and strengthening of fundamental rights and complementary–supportive. Within these categories, ethics was conceptualized through metaphors emphasizing regulation, adherence to rules, setting boundaries, protection, and unchangeable principles, as well as through expressions highlighting its strengthening, foundational, and supportive role. Together, these metaphors indicate that students perceive ethics both as a normative framework that regulates behavior and safeguards rights, and as a guiding structure that supports and reinforces professional practice and moral decision-making.[35] In a study examining education faculty students' perceptions of ethics, the majority of metaphors were grouped under the category of social order regulation, with ethics described in terms of rule compliance, maintaining order, and imposing limitations.[36] Similarly, a study involving medical students reported that ethics was primarily conceptualized as a problem-solving and order-regulating phenomenon, with most metaphors emphasizing its role as a social regulatory mechanism.[37] The convergence of these findings across different academic fields suggests that students tend to perceive ethics predominantly as a structure that ensures order, regulates behavior, and protects rights at both individual and societal levels. This perception aligns with the broader literature, which defines ethics as a system of values, principles, norms, and standards essential for maintaining harmony, well-being, and social welfare in individual and collective life. From this perspective, the metaphoric expressions identified in the present study reflect a shared understanding of ethics as both a regulatory and supportive force shaping moral conduct and professional responsibility.

In addition, one-fourth of the students used metaphors such as inner happiness and restlessness, key-lock, devil and angel, heart, and brain, which express opposing elements, to convey that ethics functions as a two-way process. For instance, the "angel" represents all that is good in humans, whereas the "devil," a fallen angel, represents all that is bad. Nursing students are constantly confronted with decision-making that is moral in nature. Thus, we consider that nursing ethics education for these students might be best achieved through a supportive approach that takes their religious viewpoints into account to improve beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Almost one-fourth of the students who developed individualism-related metaphors likened ethical values to respect, conscience, belief, emotion, kindness, and an inner voice. The development of ethical values in nursing students, influenced by their personal values and attitudes toward ethical behaviors, was associated with their perceptions.9 Through key metaphors such as culture, moral norms, society, country, and economy, students highlighted the sociality of ethics ideals, indicating their understanding of the importance of cultural and societal competence in nursing care. There are several ethnic and religious groups in Türkiye. In the context of such cultural diversity, the existence of these groups calls for a cross-cultural perspective. Many studies suggest that, because nursing is a profession with a high likelihood of caring for patients with diverse cultural and health beliefs, this competency should be specifically promoted in nursing ethics education. Additionally, ethical case examples or simulation scenarios involving culturally diverse populations and ethical dilemmas can be emphasized to better prepare students for the profession.

Limitations

The results of this study are limited to the time of data collection and the study population. Thematic analysis was used to gather a wide range of metaphors, and the research team's interpretations were used to determine the themes. As a result, it is possible that different team members may interpret metaphors differently based on their sociocultural background, individual experiences, professional training, and other characteristics. However, this subjectivity is inherent in qualitative research and reflects the richness of individual human experiences.

Conclusion

Many metaphors related to ethics and ethical values were identified in this study. The present findings may enable educators and researchers to gain a deeper understanding of ethics and ethical values in nursing from a different perspective. Furthermore, this study provides information that may be used to assess nursing students' perceptions of ethics and ethical values at the onset of their professional education and to monitor how these perceptions develop throughout the educational process in relation to the quality of nursing care and curriculum content.

Based on the findings of this study, future research may further explore nursing students' metaphoric perceptions of ethics and ethical values across different educational levels, cultural contexts, or clinical experiences. Longitudinal studies could examine how these metaphoric perceptions evolve throughout nursing education and professional socialization. In addition, comparative studies involving students from different health disciplines may contribute to a broader understanding of how ethics and ethical values are conceptualized within healthcare professions. Finally, metaphor analysis may be used as a complementary qualitative approach in ethics-related research to support the exploration of abstract and value-laden concepts.

Ethics Committee Approval: The study was approved by the İzmir Katip Celebi University Social Research Ethics Committee (Approval Number: 2023/18-02, Date: 01.11.2023).

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