



SAĞLIK BİLİMLERİNDE GÜNCEL YAKLAŞIMLAR

CURRENT PERSPECTIVES ON  
HEALTH SCIENCES

Research Article

## Determining the death metaphors of nursing students: a phenomenological research study

### Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin ölüm metaforlarının belirlenmesi

Merve Bat Tonkuş<sup>1\*</sup>, Behice Belkıs Çalışkan<sup>1</sup>, Ece Alagöz<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Istanbul Yeni Yüzyıl University

<sup>2</sup>Beykent University

<sup>3</sup>Maltepe Univesity

Received 09.08.2022

Accepted 28.09.2022

Published Online 30.09.2022

Article Code CPHS2022-3(2)-3

#### Abstract

**Aim:** In this study, the aim was to determine the perceptions about death of the students studying in the nursing department through metaphors. **Materials and Methods:** In this research, the phenomenology pattern, which is one of the qualitative research methods, was used. 169 students who study at a foundation university participated in the study, and sample selection was not done. The students were asked to complete the sentence 'death is like.../similar.'/'Because .....! **Results:** The analysis of content was done in the analysis of metaphors. 79.9% of the students are women, and 29.9% are second grade students. The students produced 11 different metaphors for the concept of death. The metaphors that they produce were collected into four categories: Infinity, ambiguity, end, and inception. **Conclusion:** Handling and talking about the concept of death can make the approach of nurses involved in end-of-life care to death easier. The studies evaluating nursing students' beliefs and perceptions about death are recommended

#### Öz

**Amaç:** Bu çalışmada, hemşirelik bölümünde öğrenim gören öğrencilerin ölümle ilişkin algılarının metaforlar aracılığıyla belirlenmesi amaçlanmıştır. **Gereç ve Yöntem:** Bu çalışmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden biri olan fenomenoloji deseni kullanılmıştır. Araştırmaya bir vakıf üniversitesinde öğrenim gören 169 öğrenci katılmış olup, örneklem seçimi yapılmamıştır. Öğrencilerden 'ölüm gibidir.../benzer.'/'Çünkü .....' cümlesini tamamlamaları istenmiştir. **Bulgular:** Metaforların analizinde içerik analizi yapılmıştır. Öğrencilerin %79,9'u kadın, %29,9'u ise ikinci sınıf öğrencisidir. Öğrenciler ölüm kavramına yönelik 11 farklı metafor üretmiştir. Ürettikleri metaforlar sonsuzluk, belirsizlik, son ve başlangıç olmak üzere dört kategoride toplanmıştır. **Sonuç:** Ölüm kavramının ele alınması ve konuşulması, yaşam sonu bakımına dahil olan hemşirelerin ölüm yaklaşımını kolaylaştırabilir. Hemşirelik öğrencilerinin ölümle ilgili inanç ve algılarını değerlendiren çalışmaların yapılması önerilmektedir.

#### Keywords

death  
nursing students  
attitude to death  
metaphor

#### Anahtar kelimeler

ölüm  
hemşirelik öğrencileri  
ölümüne karşı tutum  
metafor

#### Corresponding Author

Ece Alagöz  
alagozece@gmail.com

#### ORCID

M Bat Tonkuş  
0000-0002-1046-6862  
B Belkıs Çalışkan  
0000-0001-7249-2954  
Ece Alagöz  
0000-0002-4913-0944

To cite this article:

Bat Tonkuş M, Belkıs Çalışkan B, Alagöz E. Determining the death metaphors of nursing students: a phenomenological research study. Curr Perspect Health Sci, 2022;3(2): 68-73.

## INTRODUCTION

Death is a universal truth. In the face of this reality which is difficult to understand, people attributed some meanings to death (1). Death is a phenomenon that every individual will experience, but it is unknown when and how. (2). People attribute different meanings to death which cannot be exactly defined. The meaning people attribute to death varies with their personality traits, social environment, and beliefs (3). Death is one of the most feared and even ignored topics in society, causing a lot of confusion. While most people think that life and death complete each other; many think the opposite is true. This natural process consists of a few concrete realities for all people. The idea that people develop about death follows them throughout their entire existence. Moreover, efforts to confront it naturally only contribute to the development of beliefs that reject an undeniable truth. He encourages them to convey chronological time, that is, the time that determines the end of life, and often envisions other possibilities for its continuity (3,4). Death is an annihilation for some people, and the beginning of an eternal life for others (1).

The phenomenon of death is a situation that health workers encounter more frequently than other people, but they are still not prepared to face it. It is necessary to learn to understand death, to accept it, and to leave the point of view of the failure that this phenomenon can cause (4). Nurses in health-related professions are given lots of responsibilities, especially for those who have close relations with patients. In this context, nurses are more exposed to the phenomenon of death because they deal with patients directly and spend more time with them, especially in the care process. But this does not mean that they are prepared. Nursing students encounter near-death patients during their education, and they learn how to care for these patients (5,6). Clinical experience, which is an integral part of nursing education, forms the basis of postgraduate nursing practice (7). Nursing students often experience the phenomenon of illness, pain and death during clinical practice (4,5). Situations such as the high need for care of individuals who are about to die, their worsening over time, nursing students' comforting patients in their last period, and witnessing death can cause nursing students to experience different emotions and situations.

Death can cause nursing students to experience different emotions and situations (1,8). The meaning that nursing students attribute to death and their attitudes towards patients have an important role in the quality of the care given to the patient during the death process (9,10). In this sense, it is an experience that helps students to examine death, talk about it, understand its impact on daily life during and after their college education, to reduce the stress of death (4,5,11,12,13).

Metaphors are how people perceive the world. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of metaphor, defines the metaphor as "not only a language, but also a tool that the individual uses to convey, and express thoughts and subjective experiences that he or she is not aware of" (14). People use metaphors to express their own feelings and thoughts. For this reason, it is important in determining the perspectives on life and revealing the ways of interpreting events. Metaphors enable individuals' value judgments and assumptions to reveal (14,15).

This study aimed to reveal nursing students' perceptions about the phenomenon of 'death' through metaphors. What are the metaphors of nursing students about the concept of death in the study? The answer to this question was pursued.

## METHODS

### Research pattern and place, time of research

In this research, the phenomenology pattern, one of the qualitative research methods, was used. The phenomenology pattern is qualitative research approach aiming to reveal the perceptions that are not fully identified (16). This study was conducted online with students in the nursing department of a foundation university from April to July 2021.

### Universe and sample

The population of the study consisted of 281 students in the first, second, third, and fourth grades of the nursing department of a foundation university in the academic year of 2020-2021.

Sample selection was not done in the study, and it was conducted with 164 volunteer students.

## Data collection

Data were collected online through 'personal information form' and 'semi-structured questionnaire'. The personal information form consisted of 3 questions which were about age, gender, and class parameters. The semi-structured questionnaire consisted of a question which questioned the students' perceptions regarding the concept of death. It was explained to the students what a metaphor is through examples, and they were asked to complete the sentence 'death is like.../similar'-'Because .....

## Data Analysis

Content analysis was used while analyzing the students' metaphors they produced for the concept of death. Content analysis requires a more detailed study of the collected data and access to the themes, codes and semantic expressions that explain these data (17).

Content analysis was done at five stages: naming, classifying, developing categories, ensuring validity and reliability, and transferring data into the computer. At the naming stage, the metaphors produced by the students were listed based on the similar work of Teskereci et al. (2019), and they were examined to see if they were obvious and clear. Each metaphor was compared to the others, and the similar ones were listed by separating. Each researcher looked through by reading; they performed the necessary evaluation, and so the list of metaphors was created. At the stage of category development, a total of four different categories were developed considering the metaphors list. The opinions of two lecturers were asked to ensure whether the metaphors used in the four categories developed during the validity and reliability stage represent a conceptual category in question. The coefficient of Cohen's Kappa was calculated to find the compatibility of data encoders, and the researchers' harmony was evaluated in line with the values found. If the range of compatibility value is 0.20 or less than 0.20, poor compatibility; If it is between 0.21- 0.40, below-medium compatibility; If it is between 0.41-0.60, medium compatibility; If it is between 0.61-0.80, good compatibility; If it is between 0.81-1.00, excessively good compatibility (18). The range of compatibility was found as 0.64 in this study. This range shows that the compatibility among the researchers is good. All of the data were transferred into the computer in word format at the stage of transferring data into the computer.

## RESULTS

**Table 1.** The range of descriptive qualities of students (N=164)

Parameters		n	%
%Age	18-20	72	43,9
	21-23	85	51,8
	24 and older	7	4,3
Gender	Women	131	79,9
	Men	33	20,1
Grade	First year	43	26,2
	Second year	49	29,9
	Third year	36	22,0
	Fourth year	36	22,0
<b>Total</b>		<b>164</b>	<b>100,0</b>

It is determined that 51.8% of the students participating in the study are between the ages of 21 and 23, and 79.9% of the students are women, and 29.9% of them are in their second year (Table1).

**Table 2:** The theme, the metaphors, and the terms

Theme	Meta-phors	Terms	N (%)
Infinity	Return	It is to return to where you belong by passing through the door that opens to the afterlife.	12 (7,2)
	Sleep	You fall asleep in an eternal sleep that is irreversible.	11 (6,6)
	Eternity	There is an afterlife, and it is eternal.	11 (6,6)
	Travel	An eternal travel with no return.	12 (7,2)
Ambiguity	Obscurity	It is unknown when it will happen.	12 (7,2)
	Secret	A road full of secrets	25 (15,1)
End	End	The body cannot fulfill its physical and biological activities after death.	10 (6,1)
	Farewell	An irreversible farewell to the loved ones and to the life that you live.	31 (18,7)
	Star	When we think that the people in our life are shining stars, death is a sudden disappearance of them from our life.	25 (15,0)
Inception	Inception	It is a new start to my belief even if it looks like an end.	7 (4,2)
	Adventure	It is an inception for new adventures.	10 (6,1)

In the study, it was tried to attribute new meanings of metaphorical statements of nursing students about death with their subjective point of view. The themes emerged, the metaphors created in line with the themes, and the students' statements were given in table 2. In line with the answers of the students, 4 themes were determined as infinity, ambiguity, end, and inception.

## Infinity

Infinity, the first theme, embodies that the perception of death is a way to infinity and a door that opens. In table 2, the students expressed the metaphors for the theme of infinity as return, rest, eternity, and journey. The terms of 'It is to return to the place where you belong to by passing through a door that opens to the afterlife,' there will be an afterlife after death, and 'You will fall asleep in an eternal sleep that is irreversible.' the analogy of death with eternal sleep is seen in the statements that death will be awakened from sleep to eternal life, death is seen as a phenomenon such as a door to the infinity, and a sleep that is irreversible in this way. The participants state that death is an aim and a journey for the beginning of the afterlife.

## Ambiguity

The theme of ambiguity is characterized by the uncertainty of when and how death will come, as well as the mystery of what will happen after death. The metaphors of the students about ambiguity were stated as obscurity and secret (Table 2). The metaphors overlap with the Islamic belief that people will be sent into hell and heaven after death for the purpose of prize or punishment as a result of their behaviour. The students are unsure about death, which can be seen in phrases like 'It is unknown when it will happen' and 'A road full of secrets.'

## 'End

The end, the third theme, , embodies that death is a farewell, and the fact that man comes from the earth and returns to the earth. It was stated that the participants perceive death as a farewell to their loved ones, to their body and to their life, so the metaphors of the end, farewell, and star appeared (Table 2). It is understood that the majority of the participants think that death is an end which their ties to life and their loved ones are irreversibly broken as stated in the phrase 'An irreversible farewell to loved ones and the life you live.'

## Inception

As the categories of the metaphors of inception (religious belief) and adventure, inception, the fourth theme, is their own feelings' answer to death. . In the students' statements about metaphors (Table 2), it is seen that they state that death is the beginning of the next life (heaven). Death is like the beginning of life,

but the sense of detachment from life occurs when it happens.

## DISCUSSION

Death is a universal truth and an inevitable phenomenon. It is an end and annihilation for some people; however, it is a start for some. People attribute different meanings to the concept of death which is very difficult to describe; these meanings occur by the effect of social environment, culture, and religion, etc. that people have. Because they believe that death is a threat to their existence, death affects all people as they know the truth that everyone will die. (3, 19, 20).

Death is handled during the undergraduate education, because it is a situation that students often encounter in clinical practice. Death becomes a phenomenon that can be questioned by examining for each nursing student. In the study, nursing students described death with 11 metaphors, and these metaphors were gathered under four headings : 'infinity', 'ambiguity', 'end', and 'inception'. Teskereci et al. determined 46 metaphors in a parallel study and categorized them under the headings of 'inception', 'end', 'mystery', and 'infinity' (2). Özavşar analysed death by the metaphors of travel, price, sleep, enemy, and nihilism in his study that he analyzed the metaphors about death concept (21). Jo and An reached four metaphors such as 'rest', 'fear', 'separation', and 'new life' in the study that they evaluated death metaphors through collage art work of nursing students in Korea (22). Similar to the literature, the themes created in this study show that death is a transition to a new and eternal life and an uncertain process.. In the study, it was concluded that the metaphor of 'farewell' was majority with 18.7% of the metaphors determined for the concept of death. At the same time, it is seen that the rate of 'secret' (15,1%) and 'star' (15,0%) metaphors is also high.

According to the findings of a study conducted by Koku and Ateş with 250 nurses, they concluded that nurses describe death as 'the end' (17,2%), 'the extinction' (19,2%), 'the inception' (11,2%), and 'the infinity' (10,0%) (23). When Taşdemir and Gök asked students to define death in their study conducted with nursing students, they reached the conclusion: "the annihilation, the end, a road to the afterlife" (28.3%), "a new life" (23.8%), "an inevitable end" (11.5%), "a change of dimension, a change of place" (9.4%), and "the infinity" (4.5%) (24).



On the other hand, Han and Lee stated that students defined death as “the end” and “absence” in their study carried out with nursing students. In a study which was determined the metaphors of death by nursing students in Korea, it was said that students defined death as “Death is a comma, not a period. Life is a resting stop of the whole journey, and I believe that life and death are interconnected”, “Death means taking off all my clothes that I have worn for a lifetime. Showing myself naked is not an easy task, but it will ultimately make us feel comfortable and free.”, “Death provokes the feelings of fear and uncertainty due to its suddenness of unpredictability” and “Death means separating from a loved one forever.” (22) The themes created in the research are related to the fact that death is an inevitable end, full of mysteries, and the fact that the end imagines death, similar to the literature. Benedetti et al. reported the following sentence in a study in which they investigated nursing students’ perceptions of death; “I think death is the end of those who fight for a lifetime or watch life go by through a window”. It was thought that a sense of injustice roused in the student who expressed the last concept of this sentence, against those who fought for life and accepted death as a reward, and this reflected on the person as pain and suffering. Such a perception manifests itself with a kind of existential emptiness that puts an end to the sense of continuity and creates disappointment (4,25).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In the study that the concept of death was defined through metaphors, the approach of nursing students to death was not negative. On the other hand the students characterized death as ‘ambiguity’, ‘inception’, ‘end’, ‘infinity’. Talking about the concept of death can make the approach and acceptance of nurses involved in end-of-life care to death easier. The studies evaluating nursing students’ beliefs and perceptions about death are recommended.

### 6.1. Limitation of the Study

This study has some limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized beyond the study group. Second, this study was conducted in a large city and among university students. There is a need for studies involving young people from different socioeconomic and educational levels living in rural areas as well as urban areas of Turkey. Third, because the data were collected online, it could not reach the students who did not have internet access and did not have a computer.

**Çıkar çatışması \* Conflict of interest:** Yazarlar çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan ederler. \* The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

**Etik Kurul Onayı \* Ethics approval:** (Tarih-No: 12.01.2021/ 2021/01-558)- (Date/Number: 12.01.2021/ 2021/01-558),

**Yazarlık katkısı \* Author contributions:** Study design: MBT, EA, BBÇ ; Data collection: MBT, EA, BBÇ; Data analysis: MBT, EA, BBÇ; Manuscript writing MBT, EA, BBÇ.

**Maddi destek:** Maddi destek alınmamıştır.

*Conflict of interest/Çıkar çatışması: Yazarlar ya da yazı ile ilgili bildirilen herhangi bir çıkar çatışması yoktur.*

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