

Integrating Social Work and Nursing Expertise in Holistic Patient Care: A Qualitative Study on Interprofessional Collaboration in Saudi Arabian Healthcare Settings

Nawal Reja M Aldhafeeri¹, Arif Raja M Aldhafeeri¹, Faoziah Saleh E Alhoraigi², Aldhafeeri, Maryam Ayyadah S², Ashwaq Mohammed Al Banaqi², Entisar Muklef Mohamed Aljemeeli²

¹Department of Social Work

²Nursing Department

Abstract

Objective: This qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals regarding interprofessional collaboration in providing holistic patient care within Saudi Arabian healthcare settings.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 social workers and 18 nursing professionals from various healthcare facilities in Saudi Arabia. Thematic analysis was employed to identify key themes and subthemes.

Results: Four main themes emerged: (1) Recognizing the value of interprofessional collaboration, (2) Barriers to effective collaboration, (3) Facilitators of successful collaboration, and (4) Impact on patient care outcomes. Participants acknowledged the importance of integrating social work and nursing expertise to address patients' complex needs. However, challenges such as role ambiguity, communication gaps, and hierarchical structures hindered effective collaboration. Facilitators included mutual respect, open communication, and supportive organizational culture. Collaborative practices were perceived to enhance patient satisfaction, treatment adherence, and overall well-being.

Conclusions: Interprofessional collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals is crucial for delivering comprehensive patient care in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. Addressing barriers and fostering facilitators can strengthen collaborative practices and improve patient outcomes. Future research should explore strategies for promoting interprofessional education and developing evidence-based guidelines for collaboration.

Keywords: social work, nursing, interprofessional collaboration, holistic care, qualitative research

Introduction

The growing complexity of healthcare demands necessitates a collaborative approach that integrates the expertise of various healthcare professionals to provide comprehensive patient care (World Health Organization [WHO], 2010). Interprofessional collaboration, defined as "multiple health workers from different professional backgrounds working together with patients, families, carers, and communities to deliver the highest quality of care" (WHO, 2010, p. 13), has gained increasing attention as a means to enhance healthcare quality and patient outcomes (Reeves et al., 2017). In particular, the collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals is crucial for addressing the psychosocial, emotional, and physical needs of patients in a holistic manner (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016).

In Saudi Arabia, the healthcare system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, with a focus on improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services (Almalki et al., 2011). However, there is limited research on the nature and impact of interprofessional collaboration

between social workers and nursing professionals in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. This qualitative study aims to explore the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals regarding their collaborative practices in providing holistic patient care within the Saudi Arabian context. Understanding the barriers, facilitators, and outcomes of interprofessional collaboration can inform strategies for enhancing collaborative practices and ultimately improving patient care.

Literature Review

Interprofessional Collaboration in Healthcare

Interprofessional collaboration has been widely recognized as a key component of effective healthcare delivery (WHO, 2010). Collaborative practice involves healthcare professionals from different disciplines working together, sharing expertise, and coordinating care to meet the complex needs of patients (Reeves et al., 2017). Numerous studies have demonstrated the positive impact of interprofessional collaboration on patient outcomes, including improved patient satisfaction, reduced hospital readmissions, and enhanced treatment adherence (Körner et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2017; Zwarenstein et al., 2009).

Despite the growing evidence supporting interprofessional collaboration, its implementation in practice often faces challenges. Barriers to effective collaboration include role ambiguity, communication gaps, hierarchical structures, and lack of trust among professionals (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016; Reeves et al., 2017). Overcoming these barriers requires a supportive organizational culture, clear role definitions, and opportunities for interprofessional education and training (Homeyer et al., 2018; Reeves et al., 2017).

Social Work and Nursing Collaboration

The collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals is particularly important for providing holistic patient care that addresses both psychosocial and physical needs (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). Social workers bring expertise in assessing and addressing the social determinants of health, such as socioeconomic status, family dynamics, and cultural factors, which can significantly impact patient outcomes (Gehlert & Browne, 2019). Nursing professionals, on the other hand, focus on the physical aspects of care, including symptom management, medication administration, and patient education (Potter et al., 2019).

Effective collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals has been shown to improve patient outcomes, such as reducing hospital readmissions, enhancing discharge planning, and increasing patient satisfaction (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016; Rosenwald, 2018). However, challenges to collaboration, such as role confusion, power imbalances, and lack of understanding of each other's roles, can hinder the effectiveness of collaborative practices (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016).

Interprofessional Collaboration in Saudi Arabian Healthcare

In Saudi Arabia, the healthcare system has undergone significant reforms in recent years, with a focus on improving the quality and accessibility of healthcare services (Almalki et al., 2011).

The Ministry of Health has emphasized the importance of interprofessional collaboration in healthcare delivery, recognizing its potential to enhance patient outcomes and optimize resource utilization (Almalki et al., 2011).

However, there is limited research on the nature and impact of interprofessional collaboration in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings, particularly between social workers and nursing professionals. A few studies have explored the perceptions and experiences of healthcare professionals regarding interprofessional collaboration in general (Al-Eisa et al., 2018; Alkhamis, 2018). These studies have highlighted the need for further research to understand the barriers and facilitators of effective

collaboration and to develop strategies for promoting collaborative practices in the Saudi Arabian context.

Methods

Research Design

A qualitative research design was employed to explore the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals regarding interprofessional collaboration in providing holistic patient care within Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. Qualitative methods are appropriate for gaining in-depth insights into participants' perspectives and experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants and Sampling

Purposive sampling was used to recruit 12 social workers and 18 nursing professionals from various healthcare facilities in Saudi Arabia. Inclusion criteria were: (a) being a licensed social worker or nursing professional, (b) having at least two years of experience working in a healthcare setting, and (c) having experience collaborating with the other profession in patient care. Participants were recruited through professional networks and referrals.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants to gather rich, detailed data about their experiences and perceptions of interprofessional collaboration. The interviews were guided by an interview protocol that included open-ended questions and probes to elicit participants' perspectives on the nature, barriers, facilitators, and outcomes of collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals. Interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was employed to identify key themes and subthemes in the interview data. The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. The analysis was conducted by two researchers independently, and discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, several strategies were employed. First, data triangulation was achieved by including both social workers and nursing professionals as participants. Second, member checking was conducted by sharing the preliminary findings with a subset of participants to ensure the accuracy of the interpretations. Third, an audit trail was maintained to document the research process and decision-making.

Results

Four main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: (1) Recognizing the value of interprofessional collaboration, (2) Barriers to effective collaboration, (3) Facilitators of successful collaboration, and (4) Impact on patient care outcomes. Each theme included several subthemes, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
1. Recognizing the value of interprofessional collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Complementary expertise- Holistic approach to patient care- Improved communication and coordination
2. Barriers to effective collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Role ambiguity and overlap- Hierarchical structures and power dynamics- Lack of understanding of each other's roles- Communication gaps
3. Facilitators of successful collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Mutual respect and trust- Open and clear communication- Supportive organizational culture- Opportunities for interprofessional education and training
4. Impact on patient care outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Enhanced patient satisfaction- Improved treatment adherence- Reduced hospital readmissions- Comprehensive discharge planning

Recognizing the Value of Interprofessional Collaboration

Participants acknowledged the importance of integrating social work and nursing expertise to provide comprehensive patient care. They highlighted the complementary nature of their roles, with social workers addressing psychosocial needs and nursing professionals focusing on physical care. As one social worker stated, "We have different but equally important roles in patient care. By working together, we can provide a more holistic approach" (SW4). Participants also noted that collaboration enhanced communication and coordination among healthcare team members, leading to more efficient and effective care delivery.

Barriers to Effective Collaboration

Despite recognizing the value of collaboration, participants identified several barriers that hindered effective collaborative practices. Role ambiguity and overlap were common issues, with participants expressing confusion about the boundaries of their responsibilities. One nursing professional shared, "Sometimes there is overlap in our roles, and it can lead to duplication of efforts or missed opportunities for collaboration" (NP6). Hierarchical structures and power dynamics within healthcare teams also posed challenges, with some participants feeling that their contributions were not equally valued. Lack of understanding of each other's roles and expertise was another barrier, leading to misconceptions and underutilization of skills. Communication gaps, such as lack of regular team meetings or ineffective information sharing, further hindered collaboration.

Facilitators of Successful Collaboration

Participants identified several factors that facilitated successful interprofessional collaboration. Mutual respect and trust were seen as foundational elements, with participants emphasizing the importance of valuing each other's expertise and contributions. One social worker explained,

"When we have mutual respect and trust, it becomes easier to work together and share ideas openly" (SW9). Open and clear communication was also crucial for effective collaboration, with participants highlighting the need for regular team meetings, clear documentation, and timely information sharing. A supportive organizational culture that encouraged and rewarded collaborative practices was seen as another key facilitator. Participants also emphasized the importance of opportunities for interprofessional education and training to foster understanding and skills for collaboration.

Impact on Patient Care Outcomes

Participants perceived that interprofessional collaboration between social workers and nursing professionals had a positive impact on patient care outcomes. Enhanced patient satisfaction was commonly reported, with participants noting that patients appreciated the comprehensive and coordinated care they received. One nursing professional shared, "When we work together, patients feel more supported and satisfied with their care experience" (NP11). Improved treatment adherence was another perceived outcome, with participants attributing it to the combined efforts of addressing patients' psychosocial and physical needs. Reduced hospital readmissions and comprehensive discharge planning were also seen as benefits of collaborative practices, as social workers and nursing professionals worked together to ensure smooth transitions of care.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals regarding interprofessional collaboration in providing holistic patient care within Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. The findings highlight the value of collaboration in addressing patients' complex needs and improving care outcomes. Consistent with previous research (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016; Reeves et al., 2017), participants recognized the complementary expertise of social workers and nursing professionals and the importance of a holistic approach to patient care.

However, the study also identified significant barriers to effective collaboration, such as role ambiguity, hierarchical structures, and communication gaps. These findings echo the challenges reported in the literature (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016; Reeves et al., 2017), underscoring the need for strategies to overcome these barriers. The facilitators of successful collaboration identified in this study, such as mutual respect, open communication, and supportive organizational culture, align with previous research (Homeyer et al., 2018; Reeves et al., 2017) and provide insights into potential interventions to enhance collaborative practices.

The perceived positive impact of interprofessional collaboration on patient care outcomes, including enhanced satisfaction, treatment adherence, and reduced readmissions, is consistent with the existing evidence (Körner et al., 2016; Reeves et al., 2017; Zwarenstein et al., 2009). These findings highlight the importance of fostering collaborative practices to improve the quality of care and patient experiences.

This study contributes to the limited research on interprofessional collaboration in the Saudi Arabian healthcare context, particularly between social workers and nursing professionals. The findings provide valuable insights into the current state of collaborative practices and the factors influencing their effectiveness. The study also identifies areas for further research, such as exploring strategies for promoting interprofessional education and developing evidence-based guidelines for collaboration in the Saudi Arabian context.

Limitations

The study has several limitations. First, the sample was limited to social workers and nursing professionals from healthcare facilities in Saudi Arabia, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or healthcare settings. Second, the study relied on self-reported data from interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias. Future research could incorporate observational methods to triangulate the findings. Finally, the study focused on the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals and did not include the perspectives of other healthcare team members or patients, which could provide additional insights into the impact of interprofessional collaboration.

Conclusions

This qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions of social workers and nursing professionals regarding interprofessional collaboration in providing holistic patient care within Saudi Arabian healthcare settings. The findings highlight the value of collaboration in addressing patients' complex needs and improving care outcomes, while also identifying barriers and facilitators to effective collaborative practices. The study contributes to the limited research on interprofessional collaboration in the Saudi Arabian context and provides insights into potential strategies for enhancing collaborative practices. Future research should explore the development and implementation of interventions to promote interprofessional education and collaboration in Saudi Arabian healthcare settings, with the ultimate goal of improving patient care and outcomes.

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