




# Occupational Visibility of COVID- 19 Disaster Heroes: Analysis from the Sample of Nurse

## COVID-19 Afet Kahramanlarının Mesleki Görünürlüğü: Hemşire Örneğinden Analiz

Mesiya AYDIN<sup>1</sup>   
Özen KULAKAÇ<sup>1</sup>   
İlknur AYDIN AVCI<sup>1</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> Ondokuz Mayıs University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Nursing Department, Samsun, Türkiye



### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an urgent public health problem, is a biological disaster that had a global impact. This study aimed to examine the views of the nurses on the "superhero" discourse in the media in this disaster.

**Methods:** The phenomenological research method, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the study. The research was carried out between February – April 2022 with 23 nurses working in intensive care clinics.

**Results:** In this study, the views of nurses who worked in the intensive care unit during the COVID-19 pandemic on the "superhero" discourse in the media were investigated under the themes of rise of heroism (being noticed, heroic discourse for higher efficiency, forced hero) invisibility of heroism (invisibility before the pandemic, invisibility during the pandemic) and death of heroism (the applause, I'm real... not a toy) . The findings of the study revealed that the contribution of nursing to the health system is a little more visible in crisis conditions such as pandemic.

**Conclusion:** The visibility that emerges as "heroism" or "superheroism", the vulnerability of nurses as human beings is ignored. This "professional invisibility and heroic visibility" emerges as a paradox, and nursing either becomes "invisible" as a profession or the needs of nurses for "material and moral support" as heroes can be ignored. During crisis periods such as pandemic, the vulnerability of nurses resulting from heavy working conditions should be taken into account and nurses should be supported physically, financially and morally.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Disaster, Hero, Media, Nurse, Phenomenon of heroism

### ÖZ

**Amaç:** Acil bir halk sağlığı sorununa yol açan COVID-19 salgını, küresel çapta etkisi olan biyolojik bir felakettir. Bu çalışmada bu felakette medyada yer alan "süper kahraman" söylemine ilişkin hemşirelerin görüşlerinin incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır.

**Yöntemler:** Araştırmada nitel araştırma yöntemlerinden fenomenolojik araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Araştırma Şubat – Nisan 2022 tarihleri arasında yoğun bakım kliniklerinde çalışan 23 hemşire ile gerçekleştirilmiştir.

**Bulgular:** Bu çalışmada, COVID-19 salgını sırasında yoğun bakımda çalışan hemşirelerin medyadaki "süper kahraman" söylemine ilişkin görüşleri, kahramanlığın yükselişi (fark edilmek, daha yüksek verim için kahramanlık söylemi, zoraki kahraman) kahramanlığın görünmezliği (pandemi öncesi görünmezlik, pandemide görünmezlik) ve kahramanlığın ölümü (alkışlar, ben gerçeğim...oyuncak değilim) temaları altında incelenmiştir. Araştırmanın bulguları, hemşireliğin sağlık sistemine katkısının pandemi gibi kriz koşullarında biraz daha görünür olduğunu ortaya koymuştur.

**Sonuç:** Hemşireler "kahraman" ya da "süper kahraman" olarak ortaya çıktığında insan olarak kırılganlıklarının göz ardı edilebildiği belirtilmiştir. Bu "mesleki görünmezlik ve kahramanca görünürlük" bir paradoks olarak ortaya çıkmakta ve hemşirelik ya meslek olarak "görünmez" olmakta ya da kahraman olarak "maddi ve manevi destek" gereksinimleri göz ardı edilebilmektedir. Pandemi gibi kriz dönemlerinde hemşirelerin ağır çalışma koşullarından kaynaklanan hassasiyetleri dikkate alınmalı ve hemşireler fiziksel, maddi ve manevi olarak desteklenmelidir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Afet, COVID 19, hemşire, kahraman, medya, kahramanlık olgusu

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Sorumlu Yazar/Corresponding author:

Mesiya AYDIN

E-mail: [mesiya235@gmail.com](mailto:mesiya235@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization defines disaster as "phenomena that cause adaptation problems in the society affected by them and disrupt the normal life order of society".<sup>1</sup> There are many types of disasters occurring globally. The COVID-19 pandemic, which led to an urgent public health problem, is a biological disaster that had a global impact.<sup>2</sup> A total of 115,000 healthcare workers, most of whom were nurses, died due to the disaster.<sup>3</sup> It is known that people in many countries cheered, sang, and applauded healthcare workers at night to show their respect to them for taking on this risky task during the disaster.<sup>4</sup> The visibility of nurses' experiences during this disaster increased public awareness of what nurses did every day and caused them to be labeled as heroes.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it has been stated that the heroism discourse, full of war analogies and military metaphors, is widespread in the international political leadership arena, and even that an ideology that has portrayed healthcare workers as heroes of the war between COVID-19 and humanity was produced and strengthened in the popular media.<sup>4</sup>

It is not something new that health workers, including nurses, are given the honor of heroism in disasters or wars. In the literature on the history of nursing, emphasis on "*heroism*" is frequently encountered in wars and disasters. For example, the Crimean War made Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, a national hero.<sup>6</sup> In Türkiye, the visibility of nursing as a social need coincides with the aftermath of the War of Independence. Safiye Hüseyin Elbi is the most well-known among the "*hero*" nurses of the Independence War.<sup>7</sup>

It is pointed out that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the discourse of "*heroism*" used for nurses is not a neutral expression of appreciation and sentimentality, but a tool used to achieve multiple goals such as normalizing risk exposure, building model citizenship, and preserving existing power relations that ignore talent.<sup>8</sup> It is thought that the mature management of the challenges by nurses may have caused the media to call them as heroes and that the hero discourse creates a perception that skills, education, knowledge and discipline are unimportant (or of low importance).<sup>9</sup> The most recognizable nursing figure of COVID-19 is not a real nurse, but rather a "super nurse" who was portrayed by Banksy as a masked female character wearing the traditional nurse cape. In the portrayal, the toy is specially selected by a little child among the other superheroes in the toy box.<sup>8</sup> It is stated that the media's focus on the hero narrative minimizes the possibility of healthcare professionals to address their working conditions and rights, and may cause them to

ignore even the worst situation in order not to act against heroism.<sup>10</sup>

When the literature is examined, it is seen that the phenomenon of heroism in nursing has not been investigated sufficiently. Few studies that address nurses as heroes focus on the positive effects of this discourse on increasing the visibility and moral resilience of the profession.<sup>8</sup> Abuhammad et al.<sup>11</sup> revealed that nurses are seen as heroes by many people due to their roles during the pandemic and that nurses also define themselves as heroes.<sup>11</sup> Several different studies have problematized the hero discourse in nursing or investigated the effects of this discourse on nurses' professional, social, and political identities.<sup>4,5</sup> In their study on self-transcendence during the pandemic, Aydın et al.<sup>12</sup> found that nurses defined themselves as heroes. During the publication process of this study, a question from the reviewers about what might be the basis of the "heroism" discourse led us to re-review the literature, which revealed that the "hero" discourse that emerges in crisis situations has not been adequately investigated.<sup>8</sup>

## AIM

This study aimed to examine the views of the nurses who were struggling with the a biological disaster COVID-19 crisis in the intensive care units on the "superhero" discourse in the media.

## Research Questions

- What are the experiences of nurses working in intensive care during the COVID 19 pandemic regarding the "superhero" discourse?
- What are the views of nurses working in intensive care units regarding the "superhero" discourse during the COVID 19 pandemic?
- What are the feelings of nurses working in intensive care units regarding the "superhero" discourse during the COVID 19 pandemic?

## METHODS

### Research Type

The phenomenological research method, one of the qualitative research methods, was used in the study.<sup>13</sup> Phenomenology tries to understand people's views and experiences about daily life.<sup>14</sup> by revealing what is 'hidden' in them through sensitive methods.<sup>15</sup> The Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) was used as a guide in the reporting of the research.<sup>16</sup>

### Target Population and Research Sample

The research was carried out between February - April 2022 with the nurses who cared for individuals diagnosed

with COVID-19 and treated in intensive care clinics in different provinces of Türkiye. Sample size was determined considering data saturation. The interviews were terminated when the same ideas were repeated by the participants. The study was completed with 23 participants.

### Data Collection Tools

A semi-structured interview form developed based on the literature was used to collect data.<sup>4,8,11</sup> The first part of the semi-structured interview form included descriptive questions about the age, marital status, total years of experience, and years of experience in intensive care unit and in the COVID-19 intensive care unit. The second part of the interview form includes 13 questions prepared by three female nurse researchers who are expert in their fields and experienced in qualitative this field in order to reveal the views of nurses about the news about nurses in the media, the discourse of "superheroism", and the picture drawn by Banksy. The questions were presented to the opinions of one expert on qualitative research (academic who teaches courses and conducts research on qualitative research methods) and one expert on picture analysis (academic who teaches courses and conducts research on image analysis). Some of the questions were as follows: "What are your views on the news about nurses in the media (newspapers, social media, visual media, etc.) during the pandemic?"; "Nurses were declared as heroes/superheroes in printed/visual media. What do you think is a hero/superhero?"; "What do you think about nurses' treatment as superheroes in the media during the pandemic?"; "Why do you think nurses were attributed superheroism in this process?"; "Nurses were portrayed as superheroes alongside other superheroes by a street artist in the media. What is the first thing that comes to mind about yourself/nursing when you look at this picture?"; "The media described nurses as selfless and self-sacrificing. What is your opinion on this?"<sup>4,8,11</sup> In addition to these questions, a series of probing questions (Can you explain this a little more? How did you feel about this?) were included in the interview, which encouraged the participants to answer or provide clarification. A pilot study was conducted with two nurses to examine the comprehensibility of the questions. After the pilot interview, it was determined that there were no questions that were not suitable for the purpose of the study and the data collection process was started. The nurses included in the pilot study were not included in the sample.

### Data Collection Process

Data were collected by the first author through telephone interviews with intensive care nurses due to the risk of

transmission of the COVID 19 virus. During the interview, in the question about the picture drawn by Banksy, the picture was sent to the participants via WhatsApp and their opinions about the picture were obtained. The participants were selected using the snowball sampling method, which is one of the purposeful sampling methods. The criteria for selecting the nurses to be interviewed were the participant's willingness to express herself or himself and being reflective. The snowball sampling was initiated by a nurse known to the research team and working in the COVID-19 intensive care unit of a state hospital in the province where the researchers live. Each interviewed nurse was requested to share information about nurses working in another intensive care unit, not limited to the hospitals of the province where the research was conducted, and willing to share their views on the investigated topic. During the interviews, the responses of the participants were recorded via a voice recorder with the permission of the participants. The interviews lasted an average of 32 minutes (min:29, Max:56), a total of 875 minutes. The transcription of the interviews was 144 pages.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method used in the analysis of data in descriptive phenomenological studies.<sup>17</sup> In accordance with Colaizzi's definition, the data were read independently by the researchers in the first step, through which the researchers familiarized themselves with the nurses' heroic experiences during the pandemic. In the second step, important statements of nurses about superheroism were extracted. In the third step, these important statements were carefully examined by the researchers and the meanings of the statements were interpreted. Every important quotation has been coded to ensure semantic integrity. In the fourth step, the researchers discussed experiences with common meanings and formed themes and sub-themes. In the fifth step, the researchers made a complete and comprehensive definition of all the themes constructed in the previous step about heroism in nurses. In the sixth step, the comprehensive explanations that were created were turned into concise and condensed statements that capture only those aspects considered essential to the structure of the phenomenon. In the seventh step, the interview transcripts, the codes, and the themes were sent to three randomly-selected participants to evaluate the relevance of the findings, and their feedback was received.

### Ethical Considerations

The approval of the Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee of Ondokuz Mayıs University was obtained

(Date: 28.01.2022, Number: 2022-5) prior to the research. In addition, necessary legal permissions were obtained from the Ministry of Health in order to carry out the study. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and only the volunteers were included in the research. In order to ensure anonymity, each participant was coded with a number (e.g., P1) and these codes were used throughout the research. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, the raw data was recorded on an external disk.

### Validity and Reliability

In this study, attention was paid to the focus and context of the study and the selection of the participants for validity. The most appropriate method was selected for data collection, and sufficient amount of data was collected.<sup>18</sup> Participant consent was sought to ensure reliability.<sup>17</sup> In addition, in order to increase the quality of the research, a researcher specialized in qualitative research was included in the research team, and a systematic approach was followed in the data collection and analysis process. The data were analyzed separately by the researchers, and a conscious effort was made to correctly interpret the meaning of the data. For reliability, the methods and analyses conducted were described in a detailed manner and the opinions of experts on qualitative research were obtained during the preparation of the semi-structured interview form consisting of open-ended questions. For the transferability of the data, a detailed description of the sample and data (dense description of sample, rich descriptions of the data) was made.<sup>18</sup>

## RESULTS

The mean age of the intensive care nurses who participated in the study was  $30.13 \pm 5.4$  (min:22, max:42). Nine of the participants were male. The average years of experience of the participants was  $7.8 \pm 5.7$ . The nurses reported that they worked in the intensive care unit for an average of 4.3 (min: 0.5, max: 14) years and in the COVID-19 intensive care unit for an average of 1.7 (min: 0.5, max: 2) years. Twelve participants were married and worked in the Black Sea, Marmara, and Central Anatolia regions of Türkiye (Table 1).

The analysis of the data revealed three themes and 7 sub-themes: (1) Rise of heroism (3 sub-themes), (2) Invisibility of heroism, (2 sub-themes) and (3) Death of heroism (2 sub-themes) (Figure 1).

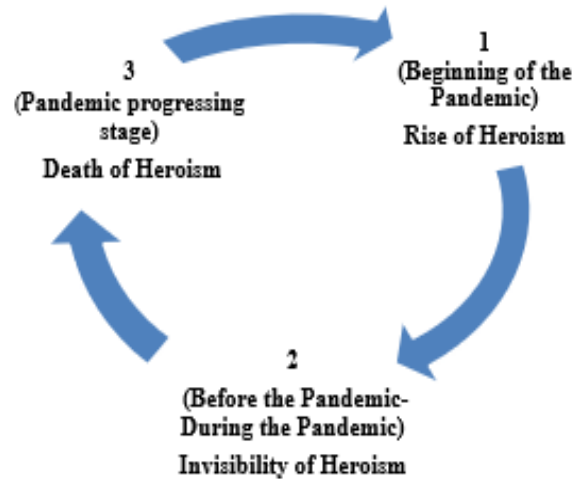


Figure 1. Themes

### 1. Rise of Heroism

Under the first theme, the rise of heroism, there were three sub-themes: being noticed, heroic discourse for higher efficiency, and forced hero.

**Being noticed:** Participants stated that nursing is a profession with low visibility, and the pandemic increased this visibility. They stated that they felt proud and happy especially when they saw the picture which was drawn by Banksy and which depicted nurses as superheroes (Table 2).

**Heroic Discourse for Higher Efficiency:** Participants stated that the heroic discourse in the media were produced to motivate them. A nurse reported that the price they paid during the pandemic was not normal, and thus, they were called superheroes (Table 2).

**Forced Hero:** Nine participants working in the intensive care unit stated that the process was very wearisome due to the cancellation of leave during the pandemic, the lack of flexible working hours, insufficient support, and exhausting working conditions. They stated that due to the intensity of COVID-19 cases, they were assigned to the newly opened intensive care units and they had trouble using the protective equipment all day (Table 2).

### 2. Invisibility of Heroism

The sub-themes of invisibility before the pandemic and invisibility during the pandemic emerged under the theme of invisibility of heroism.

**Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics of the Participants**

Participant	Gender	Age	Marital Status	Total Years of Experience	Years of Experience in ICU	Duration of working in the COVID-19 ICU	Region
P 1	M	32	Single	13 years	10 years	2 years	Black Sea
P 2	F	27	Married	5 years	5 years	2 years	Black Sea
P 3	F	27	Married	10 years	2 years	1,5 years	Marmara
P 4	F	41	Married	19 years	10 years	2 years	Black Sea
P 5	F	28	Married	4 years	2 years	2 years	Central Anatolia
P 6	F	29	Single	6 years	6 years	1 years	Black Sea
P 7	F	30	Married	10 years	7 years	2 years	Marmara
P 8	F	27	Single	7 years	3 years	2 years	Marmara
P 9	M	30	Married	8 years	1,5 years	1,5 years	Black Sea
P 10	M	42	Married	15 years	4 years	2 years	Black Sea
P11	M	31	Single	5 years	5 years	2 years	Black Sea
P 12	M	29	Married	3,5 years	2 years	1,5 years	Black Sea
P 13	F	27	Single	4 years	2years	2 years	Black Sea
P14	F	27	Single	5 years	5 years	2 years	Black Sea
P15	M	26	Single	4 years	3 years	1,5 years	Central Anatolia
P16	F	42	Married	23 years	14 years	2 years	Black Sea
P17	M	27	Single	2,5 years	2 years	2 years	Black Sea
P18	M	25	Single	4 years	2 years	2 years	Black Sea
P19	F	29	Married	10 years	3,5 years	2 years	Marmara
P20	F	31	Married	4 years	1 years	1 years	Central Anatolia
P21	M	27	Single	4 years	6 month	6 month	Central Anatolia
P22	F	37	Married	13 years	7 years	2 years	Marmara
P23	F	22	Single	1 years	1 years	1 years	Black Sea

P; Person, ICU; Intensive Care Unit

**Invisibility Before the Pandemic:** Participants stated that they were working in the same way before the pandemic; however, they were not as visible as in the pandemic (Table 2).

**Invisibility during the Pandemic:** Participants stated that nurses were not given enough place in the programs held during the pandemic (Table 2).

### 3. Death of Heroism/Heroes

Two sub-themes emerged under the third theme, the death of heroism: applause and I am real... not a toy.

**The Applause:** Participants stated that they were given an applause for their hard work during the pandemic. They reported that this collective action as a country made them happy, but it lasted for a short time (Table 2).

**I'm Real... Not a Toy:** Five participants stated that they did not like the fact that they were depicted as a toy in Banksy's work and that the other heroes in the work were not real; however, what they experienced was real. While the unreal heroes are immortal, they stated that they witnessed the death of their colleagues in real life, which affected them negatively (Table 2).

## DISCUSSION

Define is heroism as offering benefits in war or in a dangerous situation. The hero, on the other hand, is defined as the person who shows this heroic behavior. It is known that healthcare professionals always work with certain risks.<sup>20</sup> During the a biological disaster COVID-19 pandemic, these risks have increased considerably and health workers, including nurses, have begun to be defined as "heroes".<sup>21</sup> In fact, this situation is almost the same as when those who are only "soldiers" in peacetime are described as "heroes" in war. The only difference is that the war has been fought in "health institutions". As seen in the first theme of the research, the rise of heroism, the prominence of nurses as heroes during the pandemic, which is a dangerous situation itself, is seen in the sub-theme of "being noticed". The nurses stated that they were valued because of the increased visibility of their work during the pandemic, which caused not only the public but also all health workers to find an answer to the question of "What does a nurse do?". Similar to our findings, Chinese nurses who faced difficulties during the pandemic stated that they bravely overcame the challenges and were hailed as heroes.<sup>22</sup> When the artwork drawn by British street artist



**Table 2. Main Themes, Sub-Themes and Examples of Quotations Obtained from Interviews**

Main themes	Sub-themes	Examples of quotations
Rise of Heroism	Being noticed	<i>We have been on the agenda for a long time. This has increased our visibility. After all, when people were afraid and ran away, we were the ones trying to provide care. In that sense, I think it is a good thing for nursing (P7). (For Banksy's work) This is actually the unfolding of society's views of nurses during the pandemic. It's a demonstration of what nurses do. You know, the work we do is not easy and this picture demonstrates the heavy burden we carry as nurses (P11). It felt strange to be a toy that children could play with. Batman and Spiderman are so strong, and it felt strange to feel that we are considered to be as strong as they are. I thought I was very talented. The only difference is that Batman and Spiderman do things that aren't real, but we do real things (P14).</i>
	Heroic discourse for higher efficiency	<i>Because the price we paid was not ordinary. They (media) knew this too... When the pandemic first started, I started to work in the intensive care unit and had to stay away from my family because I did not want my family, my mother, father, brother, innocent people, people who have nothing to do with the virus to be infected by me. ... The people who reported such news already knew the price I paid. We were called superheroes because of these extraordinary conditions and the commitment we showed (P15). A new pandemic emerged in the world. Since the first group of people to fight the pandemic was healthcare professionals, I think they needed some motivation... I think the aim of it (heroic discourse) was to prepare us for the process ... It was a strategy employed by the media to motivate us more. Social media, TV, and newspapers all worked to reach this aim... preparing healthcare professionals psychologically for the process and maximizing their efficiency (P21).</i>
	Forced hero	<i>For example, we had scars on our faces and we were soaked in sweat. I don't know if I can work under the same conditions again. It was indeed a very intense and tiring process...psychologically and spiritually grueling (P6). I am not free and not a hero when my rights are violated. I am a true hero when I have rights and can exercise them... This really devalues us in people's eyes. We can be declared as superheroes, but I don't know how much superhero a person can be when duties are made compulsory (by law) (P19).</i>
Invisibility of Heroism	Invisibility before the Pandemic	<i>Perhaps we were a closed box. We couldn't tell what we experienced to people, or even if we told our experiences, they sounded a bit extreme... Actually, we were already working under these conditions. But I think our work became a little more visible during the pandemic (P2). The public have seen what the nursing profession includes... In fact, even the doctors, whether a professor or an assistant, and health workers had the best answer to the question of "What do nurses do?" during the pandemic. They also became ill, and so had the opportunity to see what we were doing there ... I received similar feedback from my doctor friends (P11).</i>
	Invisibility during the Pandemic	<i>When the pandemic first started, the issues that were frequently discussed in the news, panel discussions, and the statements made by the scientific committees were the ways to approach the disease and what should be done. Well, as a nurse, I worked +128 hours a month during the pandemic. Why didn't they bring this up? Why didn't they say "Healthcare professionals are working overtime due to the lack of personnel"? They could have kept such news on the agenda. But it was not done (P10). I think nurses, nurses with administrative duties, or our fellow nurses in nursing associations could have been given a chance to voice their opinions in the media. Or during the panel discussions, there could have been a nurse in addition to doctors and people from the Ministry of Health. Or, when the ministry held a meeting, I think it should have listened to nurses as well... For example, the problems related to COVID-19 were discussed and addressed, but no questions were posed to the nurses about this. Did the problems disappear when nurses were announced as superheroes? These were never discussed. I saw very few nurses. We listened to what they had to say carefully.(P12). The compliments and the praise were very nice, but no one talked about our difficult working conditions. It would have been nice if they had shared news about the challenges we faced (P22).</i>
Death of Heroism/ Heroes	The Applause	<i>There were pieces of news in which nurses were in the foreground and they were described as 'heroes'. We were given an applause for some time. Some people poured into streets only for nurses, and such news, of course, still remains in the back of our minds... I can say that it was at least a collective reward given by our country (P15). You know there was a process of giving an applause when the pandemic first started. People were kind enough to show for a few days that they loved and appreciated us, but after some time, things turned around (P4).</i>
	I'm Real... Not a Toy	<i>I think what they call heroism is not like in the movies. That's why, it (Banksy's work) seemed funny to me... This is not a realistic hero, you understand? Other heroes are not real. They are human-made stuff. However, the situation we are in right now is so real (P3). The number of transmissions increased after contact with patients and our colleagues with chronic diseases barely survived. We lost some of our close friends, which affected us deeply. It was the death of the healthcare workers that we were most affected by in this process (P11).</i>

Banksy during the pandemic and donated to Southampton University Hospital (United Kingdom) was shown, many of the participants in our study stated that they felt they were noticed and were proud. In their study on citizens' perceptions of nurses, Foà et al.<sup>23</sup> reported that citizens' and healthcare professionals' awareness of the role of nursing increased during the pandemic. On the other hand, the discourse of heroism is a problematic one. In the study by Gündüz et al.<sup>24</sup> investigating the effect of the pandemic on the nursing image in the society, it was stated that more than half of the participants had a positive change in their beliefs about the nursing profession during the pandemic process. During an interview, a specialist nurse was shown the artwork drawn by Banksy and the nurse emphasized that it was embarrassing for people to realize the significance of the work nurses do during the pandemic.<sup>25</sup> It is thought that the discourse of heroism was promoted by the fact that nurses were exposed to more risks during the pandemic; their responsibilities increased; they were separated from their families, and they had to fight the pandemic at a time when everyone stayed home. Halberg et al.<sup>10</sup> argued that the hero discourse has removed the responsibility of politicians and imposed this responsibility on hospitals and health workers. In this study, one nurse stated that they were not given enough say and that they did not have the opportunity to express the problems they faced during the pandemic. The nurse's question of *"Did these (problems related to working conditions) disappear when we were depicted as superheroes?"* is directly related to Halberg's argument. Another study in which the feeling of worthlessness was among the negative emotions experienced by nurses during the pandemic<sup>26</sup> revealed that the nurses were not attached the value they deserved.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in this study, the nurses stated that they needed to see their efforts supported financially and spiritually, their working conditions improved, and they are respected, instead of promoting a heroism discourse.

Cox<sup>21</sup> reported that the excessive use of the concept of heroism for healthcare professionals in the media can have a negative psychological effect on them, by implying that all healthcare professionals should be heroes. In our study, the nurses stated that their workload was excessive during the pandemic, their responsibilities increased, and the discourse of heroism was deliberately created for higher efficiency and so that they could fight on the front lines for longer. In addition, the nurses stated that such a discourse was promoted so that they would not have any expectations due to "their work during the pandemic". In the pandemic, nurses classified themselves as "frontline workers" who were at high risk for high viral load, infection,

and death.<sup>27</sup> Stokes-Parishce et al.<sup>9</sup> stated that the hero portrayal during the pandemic was even dangerous because nurses, who were defined as having superpowers, could step forward to overcome the negativities no matter what happened to them, and providing a safe working environment would be less of a priority for them. In another study, it was reported that critical care nurses did not perceive the hero and angel labels positively and were concerned about unrealistic expectations, potential workplace safety risks and low remuneration due to this labeling.<sup>28</sup> Another study underlined that most of the nurses considered it their duty to take care of inpatients with the diagnosis of COVID-19. However, it was also emphasized that duty and volunteerism were not equivalent, and one of the nurses stated that she *"cannot accept being described as a hero because it is not based on volunteerism"*.<sup>10</sup> The nurses in our study also stated that the process was wearisome due to the inflexibility of working hours, working overtime, not being sufficiently supported financially and spiritually, and intense working conditions. Some of the participants said that they cannot truly become superheroes when what they experience is not their own free choice.

The second theme of the study is the invisibility of heroism/heroes, which includes the sub-themes of invisibility before the pandemic and invisibility during the pandemic. The participants stated that they were working with high risk before the pandemic, but this was not seen. They further stated that they continued to work despite the increasing risks in the pandemic, but received limited coverage in the news, and they were somehow invisible. The nurses argued that they deserved to have a more say both in the media and in the boards related to COVID-19. McDonald<sup>29</sup> reported that during the pandemic, nurses directly provided a large part of health services, coordinated high-risk patient care and services, and kept the health system operational with innovations in protocols and treatments; however, these were rarely visible in pandemic response forums. The data on the pandemic indicated that nurse visibility is mostly given through generalizations within categories such as 'multidisciplinary teams' or 'health workers'. In addition, it is emphasized that invisible nursing care is expressed not as the result of a logical professional judgment based on experience and knowledge, but as a service that includes all actions, attitudes and behaviors that are intangible, undervalued, and perceived depending on the goodwill of the nurse. Unfortunately, it is stated that this has an impact not only on the lack of recognition of nurses' work in the clinical setting, but also on the position and portrayal of

nursing in public and mass media.<sup>30</sup>

According to the nurses, social support given in difficult working conditions can alleviate the degree of psychological damage and can be an important encouraging factor for nurses' compliance and professional benefit. This support refers to moral and material help and support from all aspects of society, including family, friends, leaders, and colleagues.<sup>31</sup> "Applause", which is one of the sub-themes of "death of heroism/heroes", is important because it points to the social support given during the pandemic. The nurses in the study stated that they were given an applause by the public and administrators for their hard work during the pandemic for some time. They stated that this action, which the entire society performed together, made them happy. One of the participants stated that *"There were pieces of news in which nurses were in the foreground and they were described as heroes"*. Halberg et al.<sup>10</sup> also reported in their study that in the first months of the pandemic, the media, politicians and the public supported and applauded the front-line healthcare workers around the world. Another study suggested that the public and media profile of nursing has never been this high. It has been reported that, nurses and healthcare workers were applauded, praised and honored for their work during the pandemic.<sup>32, 33</sup> However, it is also stated that artworks, headlines, and campaigns that feature nurses as superheroes can be easily forgotten and these may cause the ongoing needs of nurses and their struggle for wages, conditions, and status to be thrown aside.<sup>34</sup> In a study conducted by Stokes-Parish<sup>9</sup>, participants expressed that they were concerned about unrealistic expectations, potential workplace safety risks and low remuneration in the COVID 19 process. In fact, the results of this study are particularly important in that the nurses stated that the danger pointed out by McAllister et al.<sup>35</sup> was actually experienced; they saw nothing but applause in return for their hard work during the pandemic; the applause decreased or even ended; and their financial and moral support needs persist although they continue to work in the same way. These findings also explain why the theme of "applause" is a sub-theme of "death of heroism/heroes", rather than the theme of "rise of heroism".

Nurses and other healthcare workers are both mortal and emotionally vulnerable. As McAllister et al.<sup>35</sup> emphasized in their study, it is important to remember that nurses are not angels or heroes, and it should be noted that nurses are not superhuman beings and they can be good or flawed and strong or vulnerable as any person or any group. Figures from the National Health Commission of China demonstrate that more than 3300 healthcare workers

were infected in early March, 2020 and 20% of healthcare workers in Italy were infected and some died.<sup>27</sup> It has been also noted that there are well-known and accepted risks in the nursing profession, such as the prick of an infected needle. However, in these cases the risk is minimized through specific procedures, training, availability of relevant equipment and quality measurement, as well as organizational guidelines and assistance. On the other hand, it has been stated that the risk that nursing personnel were exposed to during the pandemic deviated significantly from the accepted risk levels.<sup>10</sup> The participants in our study reported that many of their colleagues and health workers became extremely ill and lost their lives, which considerably affected their psychology. These expressions support the argument of McAllister et al.<sup>35</sup> that nurses are not angels and heroes.

In addition, some participants stated that when they saw the picture drawn by Banksy, they did not like the idea that they were depicted as a toy and that the other heroes in the work were not real, but what they experienced was real. These statements led to the emergence of the theme "I'm Real... Not a Toy". In an interview, Professor Sabine Hahn stated that the painting evoked mixed feelings in her, similar to the nurses who participated in our study. She explained that when she saw the picture, she felt that a child was playing with them (nurses) and it was only a matter of time before they got into the wastebasket with Superman and Spider-Man.<sup>25</sup> In their study, Stokes-Parish et al.<sup>9</sup> indicate that the "hero nurse" quote may lead to the false belief that nurses are somehow endowed with high-level skills and knowledge and they have superhuman qualities. It is emphasized that this can be considered synonymous with a disciplined athlete only being "talented" and that professional commitment and work can be ignored.

### Limitation of Study

Interviews were conducted online because the risk of the epidemic continued and nurses working in the intensive care unit working in different provinces took part in the study. Another limitation is that the study was conducted in one country. Countries have experienced the pandemic process differently. Therefore, these experiences affected the views and thoughts of nurses.

The findings of the study revealed that the contribution of nursing to the health system is a little more visible in crisis conditions such as pandemic. However, when this visibility emerges as "heroism" or "superheroism", the vulnerability of nurses as human beings is ignored. This "professional invisibility and heroic visibility" emerges as a paradox, and nursing either becomes "invisible" as a profession or the



needs of nurses for “material and moral support” as heroes can be ignored. Nurses stand out as “heroes” in crisis situations such as pandemic, which should not cover up the provision of safe working environments through manipulations for the high efficiency required by the pandemic. Nurses should be empowered to plan the nursing workforce in pandemic or disaster situations that, we understand, are not at all unlikely. Nurses can work effectively and safely and be constantly visible only by receiving the financial and moral support they deserve. Nurse advocacy and participation are important in maintaining public awareness of the causes of nursing invisibility and occupational risks. When these conditions are met, the naive drawing of Banksy or the applause given by the society will not be met with suspicion by the nurses, but will be embraced modestly.

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