Motivations to nurse: An exploration of what motivates students in Pacific Island countries to enter nursing

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Motivations to nurse: An exploration of what motivates students in Pacific Island countries to enter nursing

The aim of this study was to explore the motivations of student nurses enrolled in nursing courses across a variety of Pacific Island countries. The image of nursing, the desire to help others, family and friends in the profession, personal experience, security, travel opportunities and flexibility have all been identified as motivators for people to enter nursing. To date, what motivates students in Pacific Island countries to enrol in a nursing course has not been investigated. An exploratory qualitative approach using focus group interviews with 152 nursing students was undertaken. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis, revealing four themes: (i) helping others; (ii) ‘making a difference for my people’; (iii) following in the footsteps of others; and (iv) financial and professional gain. In a time of health and nursing workforce shortages, developing a deeper understanding of what drives people can be used to improve recruitment strategies in the future.

Key words: career choice, motivation, nursing, Pacific Islands, qualitative research.

INTRODUCTION

The recruitment and retention of nurses is a global concern. The issues of migration of nurses and of an aging workforce and population are compounded in many countries by declining numbers enrolling in nursing courses. As the supply of nurses fails to meet demand, the need to understand what motivates people to select nursing as a career becomes important. In particular, the reason why students choose nursing as a career, and who or what influences them, becomes paramount for future workforce decisions. If we can better understand prospective nurses’ motivation to nurse, recruitment of nursing students can be improved. This article presents the motivations for entering nursing by students in Pacific Island countries.

BACKGROUND

As a career, nursing is generally viewed favourably by society. Indeed, the images of nursing and societal views are considered to have a strong influence on potential applicants’ decisions to enrol in nursing courses. However, it is the desire to help or care for others that is usually considered the main motivator influencing the choice of nursing as a career. Personal experience, where someone has been ill and hospitalized or has witnessed a relative being cared for by nurses in the past, is also considered to be a major motivator for undertaking nursing. Having a health professional in the family, especially a mother who is a nurse, is also known to have a significant influence on an individual’s choice of nursing. Other motivators for choosing nursing as a career include opportunities to travel, employment security, flexible working hours and the social context of the role.

No research was located that addressed the issue of students’ motivation to enter nursing from the perspective of Pacific Islanders, yet many of these countries face critical nursing shortages owing to migration and an aging workforce and population. However, there are many contextual differences between the countries where past studies on motivations for nursing have been undertaken and Pacific Island countries. This study was therefore undertaken to explore student motivations for choosing nursing across a number of Pacific Island countries.

AIM

An exploratory, descriptive qualitative study was undertaken to explore the motivations of student nurses enrolled in nursing courses across a variety of Pacific Island countries.

METHOD

Exploratory descriptive studies are useful when little is known on a topic and usually involve the collection of interview data. In this study, focus group interviews were selected, as they are beneficial where the contributions of others can stimulate participants to remember and share their experiences. There is little consensus as to appropriate numbers in focus groups, with participant numbers changing depending on the focus of the study. The majority of authors, however, consider that group
sizes between 4 and 10 are easily managed and productive, but that groups of up to 20 participants can enable informed decisions.\textsuperscript{21,24–26}

In this study, focus groups included between 4 and 16 participants, with one exceptionally large group of 36 participants. As this study was conducted across a variety of Pacific Island countries, a reference group was enlisted to guide and advise the researchers on issues of relevance to data collection and analysis.

**Sample**
The research team travelled to 10 countries across the Pacific (see Table 1 for an outline of countries included) as part of a larger study. Focus group interviews with a total of 152 students were conducted in nine of the Pacific countries visited. All students were invited to participate in the focus groups, and those who volunteered were included. In two cases, more than one school of nursing was visited in a country. A focus group was conducted at each school of nursing (Table 2 outlines further detail on the focus groups).

**Data collection**
A semi-structured interview guide was developed prior to the commencement of data collection and validated by the reference group. Two members of the research team conducted each focus group. The sessions were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim for analysis.

**Ethical issues**
Approval to conduct the study was received from the university Human Research Ethics Committee and all other relevant sources. The study was conducted under the auspices of the Pacific Human Resources for Health Alliance (PHRHA) and at the request of PHRHA member countries. Access to the students was gained from the head of the school of nursing and/or the chief nurse of the relevant country. Potential participants were provided with an information sheet explaining the study, and those who volunteered were offered further clarification prior to signing a consent form. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the interview at any time and the right to decline to answer any question(s). Pseudonyms were used in the transcription process to prevent any individual from being identified.

**Data analysis**
Data were analysed using content analysis. Content analysis, a common approach to qualitative data analysis, is defined as a process of coding and identifying themes or patterns.\textsuperscript{27} In this study, content analysis was used to identify motivations to enter nursing.

**Trustworthiness**
Trustworthiness was enhanced by meetings between the three team members (KU, JH and RH) responsible for the analysis of data. Rigor was supported by the purposeful inclusion of participants who had experience with the phenomenon under investigation and by the keeping of an audit trail that can be followed by others.\textsuperscript{28}

**FINDINGS**
All participants were enrolled in a preregistration nursing course in one of the countries visited by the

<table>
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<th>Table 1 Pacific countries visited in the study</th>
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<th>Table 2 Participants in focus groups</th>
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Four discrete themes emerged from the focus group data, and these will now be discussed in turn. (See Table 3).

Helping others
The notion of helping others was a critical value expressed by nursing students across the Pacific Island countries. They spoke of ways in which they could assist their communities regarding health care, identifying four subthemes that better explain how they wanted to be of assistance. The four subthemes are: (i) ‘saving my people’; (ii) ‘educating my people about illness’; (iii) ‘caring for my people’; and (iv) life calling.

Saving my people
A sense of their own place within their country recurred during the focus groups, with one young student commenting:

I am from a remote place in the Highlands. The mothers, as well as the kids were . . . I saw their health condition and that is what made me do nursing so I can go back and help my people (Papua New Guinea).

However, saving people in this context was different from simply delivering health care, and was rather a genuine desire to facilitate good health for the people of students’ own country or nationality. The focus of this intent is explained further:

I’ve been nursing out in public health in the rural areas, and I’ve seen the need . . . at a grass root level, so that’s why I applied . . . (Fiji).

Educating my people about illness
The idea of helping included an educational perspective where the students saw the nursing program as preparing them for a role of educator in order to help their own people overcome illness:

This course is for me not to go out there as a professional, to just give treatment and stuff like that, but to go as an educator to help them, and to help them know of the risk factors of getting sick . . . (Papua New Guinea).

Caring for my people
The theme ‘to care for’ is considered central to nursing. To care implies more than merely helping others, which can be undertaken by many who are not nurses. It is considered a central tenet of what differentiates nurses from other health providers. These students considered this concept as pivotal to their motivation:

My island has health staff, but most of the community need help. So I want to be a nurse to change the situation in my remote area (Vanuatu).

Life calling
There was a spiritual dimension to the students’ discussions. This can in part be explained by the strongly Christian affiliation of many Pacific Islanders. As such, for some participants, the desire to help others was driven by what they perceived as a ‘calling’. As one student remarked:

. . . it is within us what we deliver, it should come from within you. It is not by chance that you end up in nursing, but it should come from within you (Fiji).

This sense of having a ‘calling’ was again linked closely to the notion that they wanted to make a real difference in the lives of their people.
Making a difference for my people
Making a difference was related to the need for more and better qualified health providers, the need for health staff in rural areas, and teaching people about health and illness so that they can be better and more productive members of society in the future. The three subthemes are: (i) service for rural areas; (ii) increasing the number of nurses; and (iii) teaching people to remain well so they can be productive in society.

Service for rural areas
This theme recognises the paucity of qualified health providers in rural areas. A motivation for some participants was to become a qualified nurse so that they could deliver care in this context:

I come from a remote area [village] far [away] from a clinic with only one nurse. I want to be able to work in the village so don’t need long distance to [travel] to the clinic (Vanuatu).

Increasing the number of nurses
The participants were very knowledgeable about the shortage of qualified health professionals, including nurses, in their country and the consequent impact on health delivery. They were motivated to become nurses to help fill this void:

. . . the reason I took up nursing is because in here we have a ratio of one nurse to 56 patients, that’s why I decided on nursing (Papua New Guinea).

Teaching people to remain well so they can be productive in society
Participants also indicated the importance of health education as a way of helping their people remain well and work productively within society.

I worked as aid and it was rewarding. But only time managed to help [some] people out on [the] island, and some problems need knowledge. (Solomon Islands)
I do much with people to help them become productive. Before becoming a nurse my concern was to study in order to help people to be healthy and become productive for [the] country (Solomon Islands).

Following in the footsteps of others
This theme relates to the influence of others as a motivator to become a nurse. Three subthemes make up this theme:

(i) having observed nurses caring for others and wanting to be like them; (ii) having been cared for by nurses; and (iii) having parents, family members or friends who are nurses.

Having observed nurses caring for others and wanting to be like them
It is well known that seeing others in caring roles influences others to become carers themselves. In the case of these participants it was witnessing nurses caring for relatives and friends that motivated them to become a nurse:

When I was there with him, all I saw was that they were very passionate about what they were doing, they were really considerate about their patients . . . what they did really interested me . . . just to look at what the nurses were doing (Fiji).

Having been cared for by nurses
As has been found in previous studies involving the developed world, in some cases, the participants were motivated because they had been the recipient of nursing care:

The reason I chose nursing was from my childhood. As I grew up, I remember, I went to hospital . . . people complained . . . that gave me the motivation that I should step forward and change (Fiji).

Having parents, family members or friends who are nurses
Again, similarly to earlier studies, some participants were influenced to become nurses because they had nurses and other health professionals in their immediate family or had friends in the profession.

Mum was a nurse and [I] followed her doing her work. She used to make me take medicine to stop children refusing medicine, and I made sick children happy. If my mum can be a nurse, I can – I like helping sick people (Vanuatu).

Given all of this, it should be pointed out that these nursing students, as are students across the world, were not motivated only by altruistic values. Money and professional rewards also influenced their choices.

Financial and professional gain
Participants were also influenced by the professional and financial rewards of the profession, as indicated in the...
following four subthemes: (i) secure employment; (ii) enjoyable career; (iii) respect from society; and (iv) the broadness of the profession.

**Secure employment**
In Pacific Island countries, where professional and public service employment are viewed so positively, security of employment was important to the participants. One nursing student described this as follows:

> Compared to other professions . . . to choose this profession, we don’t have to look for a job . . . that’s the best thing about nursing (Fiji).

**Enjoyable career**
Participants perceived nursing as a job that would be enjoyable as well as rewarding. They spoke of the fun they had as nurses, and the pleasure of working with and for others. One participant expressed this as follows:

> At first I didn’t want to be a nurse. But now after experiences [I] realise it is not just [a job] for me but others as well (Tonga).

**Respect from society**
Nursing enjoys the respect of society globally so it was not surprising that the participants were motivated for this reason:

> I chose nursing first of all because everybody knows nursing is the noblest of professions (Fiji).

**Broadness of the profession**
Nursing is a profession that covers many aspects of health care and therefore offers many opportunities to qualified nurses to work across a variety of roles. The participants considered this as a motivator to enrol in a nursing course:

> Because it is a broad continuous profession (Samoa). That’s why nursing is such a wonderful field, you can continue your career; it doesn’t end there, or stop there (Papua New Guinea).

**DISCUSSION**
A wide variety of factors motivate students to enrol in nursing courses in Pacific Island countries. As the first study to investigate this phenomenon in the Pacific, our findings add significantly to the current knowledge base. Many of the motivators identified here are similar to those described in the literature previously. For example, wanting to help others is the most significant reason given for choosing a career in nursing across many studies, and this was certainly a theme that arose in every focus group.\(^6,9\) It is worthy of note that the same incentive is a key factor in what motivates Pacific Island students to enter nursing and in Western countries.

Nursing is a highly regarded profession and one that continues to enjoy the support of society. Studies of what motivates students to enter nursing have consistently included the respect of the profession as influencing that decision.\(^6,8\) The security of the profession as an ongoing option for employment was also a motivator for these participants, as for those in previous studies.\(^15\) Thus the findings from this study indicate that students are motivated to join a profession held in high regard by society.

Having family and friends in nursing or other health professions is also a huge influence on a young person’s decision to become a nurse.\(^13,15,16\) In this study some participants similarly indicated that they were motivated to become nurses because of family or friends they knew who were nurses.

Interestingly, the findings of this study indicate a desire to help or care for the people of the participants’ own country in particular, rather than to help people in general. As far as we are aware this has not been revealed in any previous study of this nature and might be related to the close family and community connection of people in Pacific Island countries.\(^29,30\)

Students voiced concerns throughout the interviews about their awareness that country resources were lacking. For example, they described the issues related to funding for health, transport, medicine and equipment. However, despite these issues the students indicated they were committed to stay and practice in their own countries. Whether this proves to be a reality is questionable, with the developed world continuing to attract nurses from poor countries to developed countries with better resources, better financial rewards and the opportunity to send remittance payments to the home country. This is an issue the profession currently grapples with, and it will continue to do so.

**LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**
The study was conducted across only 11 Pacific Island countries. It is possible that students in other countries have a slightly different experience. While the study was
being conducted there were a number of Pacific Island countries that were commencing new or upgrading existing nursing courses. As Pacific Island countries develop, there will inevitably be changes to health and funding opportunities, which will impact on nursing outcomes. Had it been possible to interview larger student numbers, richer understandings might have emerged.

CONCLUSION
In a time of health and nursing workforce shortages it is vital to understand what motivates students to enrol in nursing courses. Developing a deeper understanding of what drives people can be used to improve recruitment strategies in the future. This study has demonstrated there is a willing population in Pacific nations wanting to commence nursing programs despite the associated difficulties. It also clearly demonstrates that the strength in community connections among Pacific Island people could be the key to recruiting and retaining nurses in the Pacific, for the Pacific.

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Samoa
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Tonga
Vanuatu

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