

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Filipino next generation nurses as frontliners amid COVID-19 pandemic: A Husserlian phenomenology study

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** Since the outbreak of the unprecedented COVID-19 health crisis, Filipino nurses are one of the vital health workers in fighting its devastation in the Philippines. The study aimed to describe the lived-experiences of Filipino next generation nurses as frontliners in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

**Design:** The paper espoused the qualitative research design of inquiry exclusively Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. Study participants were selected using non-probability, purposive sampling design. The sample (N=19) was consisted of Filipino nurses with less than 10 years of practice experience, referred to as next-generation nurses, who function as frontline healthcare workers in healthcare settings, both male and female. The study was conducted in the national capital region (NCR), which has the most COVID-19 cases in the country. Due to the community quarantine imposed by the national government, the corpus of data was collected through virtual semi-structured interviews and from the participants' testimonies posted in social-media.

**Method:** An adaptation of Colaizzi's empirical phenomenological research approach was utilized to obtain an in-depth understanding and analysis of study participants' experiences.

**Findings:** The profound, life-changing experiences of a select group of Filipino next-generation nurses were unified in three interesting themes, namely: acclimatization to the challenges of the novel clinical situation, affirmation of the spirit of resiliency, and actualization of the valued calling.

**Conclusion:** The contagion has demanded a new way of working, and these nurses have risen to the challenge, and demonstrated how capable they are at responding to new situations and uncertainty. Despite facing dire challenges, they demonstrate the spirit of resiliency. This health crisis enables them to impart the value of the nursing vocation. As they navigate this unprecedented contagion, their experiences and status could likely alter at different phases of the pandemic. Hence, the provision of long-term and holistic support for them is necessary to preserve their welfare.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 pandemic, frontliners, Husserlian phenomenology study, next generation nurses

## Introduction

When the COVID-19 outbreak was declared a global pandemic, the Philippines responded and raised efforts to subdue the spread and transmission of the virus. Filipino nurses are at the front line in fighting its devastation in the Philippines (WHO, 2020). They risk their health and lives to mitigate the increasing number of suspected and confirmed COVID-19 cases (Philippine Daily Inquirer / Asia News Network, 2020). They are situating themselves detrimentally to protect the greater Filipino population (Abad, 2020). They are on the front lines of the COVID-19 battle functioning assiduously responding to save

lives and safeguard others in the communities (WHO-Western Pacific Philippines, 2020).

Filipino nurses are exposed to hazards that compromise and endanger their well-being because their work involves direct contact with patients. The United Nations (UN) News (2020) informs that Filipino nurses face the utmost risk of becoming infected themselves. WHO portrayed the death rate of Philippine nurse front-liners as disturbing compared to other countries in the region (Chee Kee, 2020). Hospital-related transmission of

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the virus is a very large threat to nurses (Huang et al., 2020). Abad (2020) reveals that concerns of Filipino nurses are inadequate personal protective equipment (PPE), lack of support when exposed or when PPEs are infringed, absence of hazard pay compensation, and non-provision of psychological aid and debriefings. Another cruel situation according to De Silva (2020) is that people consider them as carriers of the virus and should be turned away and ostracized. They are being imperiled to discrimination, harassment, and violence, predominantly due to unsubstantiated COVID-19 fears (Philippine Daily Inquirer / Asia News Network, 2020).

The significance of nurses in this global emergency is recognizable (Xion & Peng, 2020). However, when paralleled with other health professionals, nurses who are similarly serving at the forefront of the battle against COVID-19, have a considerable inferior profile (Daly, et al., 2020). Nurses according to Carryer (2020) are often not included and involved, even when issues directly affect them. Exploring the experiences of nurses during this outbreak is vital (Chen et al., 2020). Unlike other health professionals, there is a dearth in studies reporting data about nurses and their experiences of involvement in a pandemic (Fernandez et al., 2020).

To support Filipino nurses effectively, it is necessary to gain insights and understanding into their lived experiences. Hence, the study aimed to describe the lived-experiences of Filipino next generation nurses defined as nurses practicing less than 10 years (Wolters Kluwer, 2020) who serve as frontliners in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. It was guided by this central question: What characterize the lived-experiences of a select group of Filipino nurses during COVID-19 event?

The implications of these findings could help to describe and give meaning to nurses' role during this pandemic thus transforming their work status so that they can thrive and are able to provide safe and quality care. The outcomes of the study could provide support to nurses who serve on the frontlines of patient care in ensuring that they can work and respond to this crisis with more preparedness. Moreover, this study could inform future inquiries on how to cushion and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on the frontline healthcare workers.

## Methods

### Research design

The paper espoused the qualitative research design of inquiry exclusively Husserlian descriptive phenomenology. Justification of the research design utilized lies on the type of the exploratory nature of the inquiry, on the objective(s) of the study, and on the central question(s) (de Guzman, 2012). This is an inductive qualitative research design rooted in the 20th century

philosophical traditions of Edmund Husserl (Reiners, 2012). It is associated with the Filipino nurses' immediate consciousness and is focused on the meaning of their experiences in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

### Sampling design and study participants

Study participants were selected using a non-probability, purposive sampling design. The sample of 19 study participants based on data saturation, was consisted of Filipino next-generation nurses or nurses in practice of less than ten years (Wolters Kluwer, 2020), who function as frontline healthcare workers in hospitals and COVID-19 facilities, and both male and female. The next generation nurses are nurses according to Wolters Kluwer (2020) who are poised to influence the next two to three decades of healthcare. Table 1 illustrates the profile of the study participants.

**Table 1. Profile of the Study Participants (n= 19)**

Profile	Number of participants	Percent (%)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	5	26.32
Female	14	73.68
<b>Area/Unit</b>		
Emergency Room	6	31.58
Intensive Care Unit	6	31.58
Medical-Surgical	4	21.05
COVID-19 Facility	3	15.79
<b>Number of Years as Staff Nurse</b>		
1-2	9	47.37
3-4	6	31.58
5-6	4	21.05
<b>Number of Months as Frontliner</b>		
1	5	26.32
2	4	21.05
3	4	21.05
4	6	31.58

### Study site

The study was conducted in the national capital region (NCR) of the Philippines, which has the most COVID-19 cases (Biana & Joaquin, 2020). It is the epicenter of the outbreak and the government placed it under extended community quarantine.

### Research instrumentation and data collection

Due to the enhanced community quarantine imposed by the national government, the *corpus* of data was collected through semi-structured interviews using social media platforms and from the participants' testimonies posted in social-media. The virtual interviews were done using chats, video-conferencing via Facebook messenger and via zoom platform. Audio recording was utilized with the participants' consents to capture the verbatim data generated from the responses. Guide questions were developed that comprised broad, open-ended key queries. Questions such as: *How do you describe your experiences as nurse frontliner during this pandemic?; How do you describe your typical duty as nurse frontliner?; and What are the challenges you experience as frontliner?* were asked using the English language. The guide was piloted for clarity and to check for ambiguity on three Filipino nurse front liners in two tertiary hospitals in NCR. With participants' consent and permission, primary and secondary data were collected. The secondary data were the stories of the study participants posted in social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Voluntary participation was sought. Data gathering procedure transpired concomitantly with data analysis. The principles of ethics stated in the Belmont Report on the principles of beneficence, respect of human dignity, and justice were observed all throughout the research process.

Informed consent forms were virtually forwarded to the potential study participants for their voluntary participation and permission to use the stories they posted in social media for the study and to audio record the virtual interview. The full nature of the study was disclosed with the emphasis that their stories would in no way identify them as the sources. Moreover, no video recordings were done during the virtual face-to-face interviews. The researchers had only the full access to the data collected, which were deleted after the completion of the study.

### Method of analysis

The collected data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978 in Polit & Beck, 2014) strategy. Rereading the field text allowed familiarization of the data collected. Meanings and codes were formulated from the identified significant statements. They were clustered into themes and were described thoroughly. They were then synthesized into statements that capture the essence of being a nurse frontliner in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic.

Imaginative variation was likewise employed when researchers intuited the essence to understand the dynamic features of the phenomenon (Giorgio, 2008). This was followed by structural analysis that involved independent identification of significant statements and data categorization and deducing and testing rules from the data organization, where themes were

independently developed and validated. A dendrogram, which was utilized to organize data sets and to identify structural relationships, was created that facilitated the theme development. Dendrogram is a diagram utilized to organize data sets and to identify structural relationships.

Eidetic reduction was applied where the researchers bracketed their personal and theoretical knowledge, excluded existential affirmations, and suspended any judgment of the phenomenon under study (Giorgio, 2008) to prevent bias and subjectivity. Validation strategy of member checking was utilized wherein data collected and analyzed were reverted back to the study participants for verification and validation. To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings and increase the rigor of the study, the process of horizontalization was observed wherein the data collected were considered with equal value when the researchers exclusively recognized significant statements that reflected the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Creswell, 2009). To establish that the themes portrayed the richness of the experiences of the Filipino nurse frontliners, resonance was applied (Flick, 2009).

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## Findings

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The profound, life-changing experiences of a select group of Filipino next -generation nurses were unified in three interesting themes, namely: *acclimatization to the challenges of the novel clinical situation, affirmation of the spirit of resiliency, and actualization of the valued calling*. The contagion has demanded a new way of working, and these nurses have risen to the challenge, and demonstrated how capable they are at responding to new situations and uncertainty. Despite facing dire challenges, study participants demonstrated the spirit of resiliency. This health crisis enables them to impart the value of the nursing vocation.

### *Acclimatization to the challenges of the novel clinical situations*

Amidst all the ambiguity about the virus and how long it might take before life starts to revert to some variation of normal, Filipino nurses in this study have been experiencing a great deal as there remains much about these recent times that is new. The emergence of COVID-19 resulted into new ways of doing things that changed the shape of nursing practice. It undermines and disrupts routine activities. These nurses adapt to this unprecedented challenge, from finding novel ways of working to functioning in entirely new roles. As reported by a participant: "Our daily routine has changed, and this new routine has quickly become the norm. One challenge I had to cope with was the uncertainty of my shift. Before the pandemic, I was used to going on an 8-hour shift knowing that I have another nurse to endorse the patients after my shift. This time,

due to some nurses are on quarantine, I most of the time go on 12-hour duty. I have to advocate for my patients because relatives are not allowed to stay with the infected patients. I assist them with most of their activities of daily living.” (Study Participant[Sp]9)

#### *Affirmation of the spirit of resiliency*

The nurse participants in the study exemplify what it is to embody resiliency. They affirm their capacity to endure the adversities brought by a deadly and highly contagious pandemic. They combat fear to defy the contagion knowing that every duty shift is a risk. They confront insidious forms of challenges with positivity. These nurses have accepted that being a healthcare provider in this current time is hazardous thus they must contend with the intensified risk of infection in their work. As articulated by a participant: “We articulate and demand for the delivery of adequate PPE to protect us. We are cognizant of the importance of being able to access them to increase our morale and ensure our safety as we continue to provide care to highly infectious patients.” (Sp5)

The Filipino nurses' perception that they do not face this pandemic alone and that they still could gain the compassion of most people enable them to cope with adversities. They are aware of their strong support system from varied sources. As expressed by this study participant: “Our hospital provides us with sleeping quarters and complete meals so we won't be commuting to our homes thus protecting our loved ones. My husband and kids constantly communicate with me just to inform me that they are fine. Hence, it lessens my worries and I can focus on my work.” (Sp7)

The study participants' ability to persistently report for work performing their functions risks and all is motivated by the adulation and appreciation afforded to them by their patients, some in the government, and the media. Their courage and commitment amid rising human tragedy are being widely much admired. As reported by this study participant: “The stress we experienced as we continuously face the COVID-19 battle eases knowing that our services are being recognized. Most patients especially those who recovered are grateful of our efforts.” (Sp1)

#### *Actualization of the valued calling*

Since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, Filipino nurses in the study demonstrate how valuable assets they are during this pandemic health crisis. Never before has their valued calling been more clearly demonstrated. As the Philippines cope with the impact of COVID-19 they already rise to the occasion and

have been working incredibly harder than ever even risking everything to be on the front lines of patient care. They have stepped up extraordinarily giving a great deal in terms of their availability, expertise, perspectives, and labor.

The study participants work long-extended hours without complaint and most of the time were deprived of days off. They stayed on duty and were away from their family, even foregoing their family obligations. Some chose to go into quarantine away from home after working shifts on the COVID wards and intensive care units. They deal with fear, stress, and exhaustion as well as situate themselves at risk of infection just to provide care to their patients. They continue everyday to face every shift with compassion, selflessness, courage and hope. Their commitment to their vocation keeps them going. As expressed by a study participant: “During this COVID pandemic, I worked 14 days straight and was doing 12 hour shifts. I did not visit my parents who are older adults because I am not certain that I don't carry the virus with me after my duty. These are some of the sacrifices I have to endure because I have to be true to my vocation as a nurse.” (Sp3)

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## Discussion

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Working in a totally new context challenges nurses to adapt as the context and their roles evolve and expand. For the nurses, the COVID-19 pandemic is uncharted territory (Ortega & Gonzales, 2020). Cabrera (2020) asserts that COVID-19 is a profound change in normalcy and routine. In a health crisis such as a pandemic, according to American Nurses Association (ANA, 2020), nurses can find themselves operating in environments that are atypical and different from the conventional, hence, being equipped to adapt under this health crisis is a paramount. Nurses face great challenges as they function in their crucial role (Xiong & Peng, 2020).

Today, Filipino nurses are challenged like never before with unprecedented demands. For them, going back to working during the pre-COVID nursing activities is unparalleled and farfetched. As nurses face this new challenge there is a need to contextualize and update their role-specific guidelines and training.

The Filipino nurses in this study are resilient and are able to deal with the health crisis. Jackson et al. (2007 p.3) define resilience as “the ability of an individual to withstand adversity”. Nurses need to focus on their duty in order to function effectively, thus multiple support systems and self-adjustment skills are needed (Liu et al., 2020). While nurses are committed to doing their sworn duty to serve the public, it is very essential for them that their value is being recognized and appreciated (Crisostomo, 2020).

In the face of the vicious COVID-19, Filipino nurses affirm and exhibit the spirit of resiliency. Nurses need protection and provision of their needs to enhance their morale and reduce uncertainty and fear. Healthcare settings must be safe working environments with adequate protective supplies. These nurses are likewise challenged to be responsible for their continuous training and development on infection prevention and control.

Compelled by an oath to heal the sick, Filipino nurses actualize their vocation by devoting their duty days confronting the highly contagious COVID-19. Nurses forgo their own needs to actively participate in the pandemic work and offer selfless contributions out of moral and professional responsibility (Aliakbari et al., 2015). The nursing vocation entails nurses' desire to help individuals who are afflicted with the formidable virus while dealing with various challenges (Jackson, et al., 2020). WHO (2020) underscores the duty of nurses to respond to their calling in the face of overwhelming odds.

Participants in the study are serving selflessly and demonstrating their professional dedication and commitment as they respond to this contagion. Nurses are continually inspired to come to work every day if they function within a positive and supportive environment. As such, a strong feeling of everyone being listened to and all points being taken into consideration could be developed within the healthcare settings to best support the nurses during these trying times.

## Conclusion

This inquiry attempted to describe and understand the experiences of Filipino next generation nurses as frontliners in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic. Findings of the study indicate that as the pandemic changed the landscape and dynamics of nursing practice, the study participants function in new roles in an entirely novel context and acclimatize to a completely new working routine. They embodied the spirit of resiliency as they affirm their capability to endure challenges and difficulties. Despite working in such adversity, they focused on their duties and responsibilities without hesitation as they are all bound together by their calling. Their concerted efforts to help those afflicted by COVID-19 and to curb its transmission demonstrate their professional dedication and commitment.

As the next generation Filipino nurses navigate this uncharted and unprecedented contagion along the front lines of patient care, their experiences and status could likely alter at different phases of the pandemic. Hence, the provision of long-term and holistic support for them is necessary to preserve their welfare. While the value of the nursing workforce is recognized, immediate and long-lasting support and solutions are

desperately needed. They should incessantly be inspired by investing on them to continue their dedication and commitment to their valued calling.

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*The power of statistics and the clean lines of quantitative research appealed to me, but I fell in love with the richness and depth of qualitative research.*

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— **Brené Brown**, researcher and storyteller studying courage, shame, empathy and vulnerability.