
Lived experiences of Filipino Red Cross volunteer nursing students in COVID-19 vaccination programs

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Abstract

Introduction Student volunteers in COVID-19 vaccination activities help augment the health care workforce. However, there is a lack of literature that explores student volunteerism in the Philippines. This paper analyses the shared meanings of the lived experiences of volunteer nursing students during a pandemic.

Methods Student nurses who had joined Red Cross vaccination activities were recruited by purposive sampling and interviewed online using a pilot-tested interview guide with open-ended questions. Participants were recruited until data saturation. The data collected was analyzed using Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method.

Results The study has identified two main themes that describe the phenomenon of student- nurse volunteerism during COVID-19 vaccination programs: 1) *personal motivation* and 2) *perceived benefits and outcomes*. There were four sub-themes under *personal motivation* - desire for personal growth, intrinsic altruism, past experiences and involvement in volunteer work, and opportunity for advocating against vaccine hesitancy. *Perceived benefits and outcomes* had two sub-themes - sense of fulfillment in the act of volunteering and opportunity for actual nurse-patient interaction.

Conclusion: The findings from the study suggest that, despite the lack of experience of working as frontliners during the COVID-19 vaccination programs, nursing students volunteered due to personal motivations and perceived benefits and outcomes.

Key words: Volunteers, students, nursing, COVID-19, vaccination

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People volunteer on a long-term basis as a function of various selfish and selfless motives and specific dispositional variables.¹ The Philippines' volunteer service sector has seen a major consolidation of non-governmental voluntary organizations in the last two decades, with organizations like the Philippine Association for Volunteer Efforts (PAVE) in 1994 and the Voluntary Organizations' Information,

Coordination, and Exchange (VOICE) in 2002. In the light of the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipino volunteers have become increasingly organized and empowered. Student nurses may possess a unique collection of knowledge, skills, and abilities that make them a particularly helpful resource during a health emergency.² Although nursing students may lack the precise training and certification required to offer clinical care, they can perform other tasks that could relieve the burden of patient care on professional registered nurses. In the Bachelor of Science of Nursing curriculum in the Philippines, professional courses are threaded from the first year through the fourth year, emphasizing the concepts with corresponding related learning experience (RLE). The BSN curriculum includes an intensive nursing practicum designed to improve nursing skills further and ensure that the BSN program results expected of an entry-level nurse are met (CHED, 2017).³ Service learning, which is any experiential learning opportunity that combines clear educational goals with service to the community, is an integral part in many health courses because it engages students in patient advocacy and active learning while providing needed health services to underserved populations.⁴ A study found that volunteering gives students the “nurse” identity among the student volunteers and non-volunteers.⁵ Among volunteer nursing students in Nigeria, 87.8% were ready to care for COVID-19 infected patients only if trained, 85.8% were willing to volunteer if there was protective equipment, and 56.7% were willing to volunteer if paid.⁶ Another study noted several motivations to volunteer – interest in a disease (68%), desire to interact with patients (61%) and a general interest in volunteering (57%).⁴ On the other hand, despite that 50% of nursing student volunteers reported a desire to use nursing knowledge and skills in relief operations after the 2016 Kumamoto earthquakes, many nursing volunteers engaged in activities that required no nursing knowledge or skills. Because they were nursing students without nursing certification, it is possible that they were viewed as unable to independently perform professional tasks done by the more experienced members of the team.⁷

Healthcare students are perceived to have the moral and professional obligation to volunteer during pandemics. However, existing literature on nursing student volunteerism in the Philippine context is very limited. This study wishes to address the lack of existing literature that supports Filipino nursing

student volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic as these students are seen as untapped resources that can help address the scarcity of healthcare workers, a highly sought workforce in the event of a pandemic. This study was formulated to provide support to volunteer nursing students and to understand how nursing student volunteers as manpower resources can be utilized to assist in the vaccine rollout and distribution as COVID-19 cases remain high, and to aid in the serious decline in the nursing workforce so crucial in fighting COVID-19. This study hopes to provide valuable knowledge to nursing students, nursing education, community health nursing, non-government organizations, and policy-making bodies to support and empower student volunteers.

Methods

The study assumed a philosophical worldview of the social constructivism paradigm to enable participants to construct and share their own meanings of their own experiences. A descriptive phenomenological approach was used to describe and explore the meanings of the lived experiences of volunteer student nurses during Red Cross vaccination programs. Students aged 18 to 23 years currently enrolled in the BS Nursing program in any school in the Philippines who had volunteered in any Red Cross Youth COVID-19 vaccination program at least once were recruited by purposive sampling through posters uploaded on each researcher’s Facebook account and through school mates. Those who joined vaccination programs not managed by the Red Cross Youth were excluded. Students who agreed to join the study were scheduled at the interviewee’s most convenient time. A 15-minute meeting prior to actual interview was conducted for each participant to explain the study, obtain informed consent, and schedule an interview date. The interview was conducted through online conferencing applications and lasted for about 30-45 minutes. The interviewer followed a pilot-tested interview guide which included open-ended questions. The researchers interviewed in groups of three, with one member being the interviewer, and the two others documenting the proceedings. The researchers continued to gather participants until data saturation was achieved.

The researchers ensured data saturation by conducting a data analysis after every interview. After several interviews, themes were repeating and no more

new themes emerged, indicating that data saturation had been reached. One of the validity and reliability methods the researchers used was bracketing, which was done prior to data collection and analysis - each researcher wrote down his or her own assumptions about the study and what themes he or she thought would emerge, to ensure that there was no bias during data analysis. Another method was part of Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method, seeking verification of the fundamental structure wherein participants were asked to review the themes and to check for any inconsistencies in findings compared to their personal experience of the phenomena.⁸

The researchers followed Colaizzi's Seven-Step Method for data analysis: familiarization which involved reviewing and transcribing recordings; identifying significant themes or statements that answered or were related to the research questions; formulating meanings or interpreting the identified significant statements; clustering themes or clustering of statements that were similar or had the same root into sub-themes; developing an exhaustive description or describing the experience from the participant's view, or how the participant defined a certain experience; producing fundamental structure or the chaining together of themes to describe the phenomenon and to chronicle the shared meanings of the lived experiences of Filipino nursing student volunteers; and verifying the fundamental structure by returning the summarized data to all participants to confirm if the structure made by the researchers was really the participants' experience/s.⁸ Significant themes and formulated meanings were organized into tables. Another table was created for the clustered themes.

Results

The researchers interviewed eight student nurses until data saturation was reached. Five of the respondents were females; six were in the fourth year and the two others were in second and third year, respectively. The study identified two main themes that describe the phenomenon of student-nurse volunteerism during Red Cross COVID-19 vaccination programs: personal motivation and perceived benefits and outcomes. There were four sub-themes under personal motivation - desire for personal growth, intrinsic altruism, past experiences and involvement in volunteer work, and opportunity for advocating against vaccine hesitancy. Perceived benefits and outcomes had two sub-themes

- sense of fulfillment in the act of volunteering and opportunity for actual nurse-patient interaction. The interrelationship of the themes and sub-themes is shown in Figure 1.

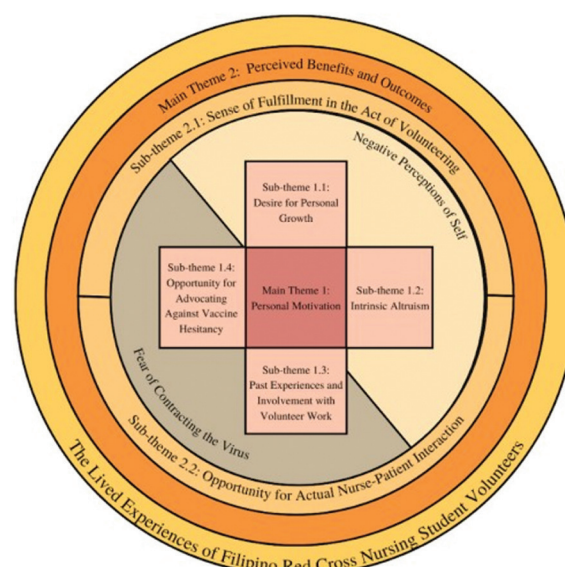


Figure 1. The lived experiences of Filipino Red Cross Nursing student volunteers.

Main Theme 1: Personal Motivation

The lived experiences of student nurses had a recurring theme of *personal motivation* which explained the reasons behind why they volunteered. The respondents talked more about intrinsic motives rather than the external factors that prompted them to volunteer. Although the participants were driven mostly by positive personal motivations, a few participants discussed their negative perceptions of themselves as volunteers because of their inadequate experience as students.

Sub-theme 1.1: Desire for personal growth

All the respondents mentioned being able to practice their nursing skills as one of the main motivators for volunteering. One participant said, "help me gain uh new experience and improve my skills so I um that opportunity, isa yung malaking opportunity for me to enhance nga my skills." Not only were nursing skills developed, most mentioned other crucial assets for nurses that could be learned and practiced, including communicating with patients

and health education, as well as important values that they deemed necessary for a nurse. This was seen in one participant saying, “mas nagiging open minded ka, tapos parang nagkakaroon ka ng additional insights dahil sa pakikisalamuha sa mga uhm tao,” and another said, “to be more grounded or become more empathetic kasi parang lahat maraming tao kasi dun sa vaccination sites, may mayaman, may di gaanong mayaman... mas namulat ako na hindi talaga lahat makaka afford or nakukuha ang mga bagay na kailangan nila. Mas na-appreciate ko na dapat maging ano mas maging thankful.” Aside from that, some of them volunteered with the belief that having the experience would not only add to their credentials but also help them improve themselves as future professional nurses; as one participant said, “it is good for our CV... Yah, you’ll get certificates for it”.

Sub-theme 1.2: Intrinsic altruism

The respondents expressed intrinsic altruism as their personal motivation in volunteering. They basically want to care for other people; they perceived participation as a chance to help and serve others. Participants verbalized: “as a student nurse parang andun na sa aking - nasa, nasa puso ko na [to help]” and “gusto ko ma-try kase parang yun nga, yung feeling na (pauses) na satis- na satisfied ka to help other people.” Volunteering also meant expecting nothing in return for services offered, according to one respondent, “[volunteerism is] willingness to help without any hesitation and asking for something in return.” Moreover, the healthcare worker-patient ratio during vaccination programs was observed by the nursing student volunteers as inadequate to meet patient demands such that it prompted them to extend help to the nurses and other healthcare workers. They saw their volunteering as a means to increase manpower during the pandemic. This was seen as participants verbalized “kulang daw yung healthcare workers sa kesa sa ratio ng patient or ng mga iva-vaccine kaya nag - kailangan nila ng help sa student nurses para matulungan sila or madagdag” and “konti lang po talaga yung uh yung nagiging volunteers natin most especially during the pandemic pero yung konting yon parang super laki sa help sa healthcare workers natin, considering na gamit na gamit na yung health care providers natin during the pandemic tapos medyo kulang pa nga actually.. as volunteers, tayo na yung parang tumutulong.”

Sub-theme 1.3: Past experiences and involvement in volunteer work

One respondent said that his parent’s invitation to previous volunteer activities during childhood influenced his decision to volunteer. “Actually, I think my volunteering time started nung elementary pa, kasi nung sa previous school ko yung mom ko kasi teacher tapos usually may mga school events na nag cacater sa mga adopted barangay ng school namin, so usually inaaya ako ng mom ko na parang [sali tayo sa ganito].” It was also seen among volunteers that previous exposure to activities outside the Red Cross encouraged one respondent to volunteer. One participant mentioned, “iniinvite lang ako ng outside sources, like out of the blue like “hey do you wanna join?... ininvite lang talaga ko... minsan Pasay, minsan Rizal, uh minsan Quezon City, kaya na-expose din ako at nag volunteer sa vaccination.”

Sub-theme 1.4: Opportunity for advocating against vaccine hesitancy

Some respondents shared their experiences discussing the importance of receiving the vaccine. One participant expressed, “So ayun parang nakwento nila na uh ayaw daw nila, na ayun hesitant pa din sila magpa vaccinate tapos ni-rerequire daw ng office nila kaya lang daw sila nandun, para magpa-vaccine so most of the time sinasabi ko, ah ito na yung chance para ma-educate mo sila for vaccination na hindi lang sila napipilitan for the purpose of their work to like help themselves para maka-cope din sa pandemic.” They saw volunteering as an opportunity to educate individuals about vaccine hesitancy. Some volunteers even stated that they were volunteering because they wanted to fight vaccination reluctance. For student nurse volunteers who deliver health education to vaccinees who only got the jab because it was required, the problem of vaccine reluctance was addressed not just before, but also during, and after vaccination. Volunteers were aware of their purpose as nurse advocates. One participant said, “At tsaka ano kasi no’n diba nakakainis ‘yong mga taong ayaw maniwala sa vaccine no’n ‘yong mga time na bago pa lang ‘yong vaccine kasi no’n eh noong nag-volunteer kami.”

Main Theme 2: Perceived Benefits and Outcomes

The study also noted another recurring theme which is the perceived benefits and outcomes. Volunteering is thought of as an act of generosity which one does not for the benefit it bestows but for the betterment of the community. However, volunteering does not mean that a volunteer could not earn any benefit. The respondents were aware of the benefits of volunteering and understood what it could do for them in the future in terms of career opportunities. Some understood that volunteering could further improve their knowledge for their profession in the future while some saw it as an opportunity to further improve their resume. Volunteering for them was seen as a way to enhance their skills and credentials.

Sub-theme 2.1: Sense of fulfillment in the act of volunteering

A participant said, “although malayo parang pursigido pa din kami na pumunta dun kasi sobrang exciting din kasi nakalimutan ko na feeling pero ayun exciting at the same time sobrang ano ang ganda, ang satisfying sa feeling, ang fulfilling.” The respondents felt that volunteering was fulfilling because they were able to use their nursing skills again since they did not have any face-to-face interaction with patients during the pandemic. Participants verbalized “during vaccination nag take kami ng vital signs siguro mga around 500 yung inassess namin... pagkatapos nun sobrang sakit ng kamay namin pero ayun mas iniisip namin na ano na fulfilling siya kasi naka help kami.” and “masaya siya yon fulfilling yung feeling ko non.” It was observed that they felt a sense of accomplishment for doing good and assisting others. Despite the tedious and tiring workload, they said volunteering was fulfilling.

Sub-theme 2.2: Opportunity for actual nurse-patient interaction

Several participants expressed their longing for experiential learning since the pandemic had prevented face-to-face classes. The student volunteers perceived the COVID-19 vaccination program as an avenue for actual nurse-patient interaction which they missed because of the health protocols and lockdowns. For the nursing student volunteers, performing tasks like data collection was already a

part of their experience in handling a patient, with one participant saying, “miss ko na din kasi mag-handle ng patient kahit na nagsusulat lang kami ng data ganyan.” They were actively engaged in the process during the vaccination programs and took the opportunity to communicate with people. They demonstrated their enthusiasm for educating people who were only getting vaccinated because of job requirements in a face-to-face setting.

Discussion

It is a shared characteristic among volunteers, including Filipino student volunteers, to be pushed by personal motivation to do volunteer work. Volunteers are people who have high intrinsic motivations to improve themselves. Student nurses volunteer because they see that this activity fuels an intrinsic motivation for them to grow into competent nurses. They seek these opportunities to improve competencies needed as a student nurse. This mirrors a study in Japan, wherein the topmost motives of many participants for volunteering were also centered on intrinsic values, their 1) willingness to support the victims, 2) engage in reconstruction support activities in affected areas, and 3) utilize the knowledge and skills they had gained as nursing students.⁹

The prevalence of online classes during the pandemic produced a lack of skill practice or experience and was recognized by the student volunteers as a weakness and something to improve on. Similarly, student volunteers from Spain reported feelings of stress due to the novelty of the virus and lack of knowledge about pandemic and disaster management.¹⁰ Volunteering provided the following educational benefits: learning soft skills such as social skills, organizational skills, and stress management by communicating under stress. Volunteer programs enabled them to engage in authentic nurse-patient communication, which was scarce in regular university education.¹¹ Although the pandemic caused serious disruption in health professions education, student volunteerism is a viable solution for such disruptions, as it also provides patient contact opportunities that may complement remote learning.¹¹ This showed the participants’ desire for personal growth, as there was an intention to improve as a student nurse. Moreover, many participants verbalized their negative perceptions of themselves after volunteering because they were able to recognize the gap between online

demonstrations and real-life skills and recognized some areas they had hoped to improve on.

Altruism is seen as another driving force behind the interest in volunteering in the present study. According to Llenares and Deocarís, the primary reason for volunteering, grounded on the theory of selflessness and altruism, is to help others.¹² The authors added the motivation to volunteer can either be intrinsic or extrinsic.¹² Volunteers driven by intrinsic factors extend themselves out of personal enjoyment, interest, or pleasure. The definition of one respondent is shared by the same authors who cited volunteerism as a phenomenon where an individual or a group act to share resources (time, money, skills, etc.) in response to the need of others without expecting any material reward or incentive.¹² Student volunteerism is recognized as an educational motivation as it assists the overburdened health system and is recognized as a solution to staff shortage during the pandemic.¹¹ Key factors such as previous volunteer experiences are positively associated with volunteering, confirming that it is an important determinant in predicting likelihood to participate in voluntary work.¹³ Moreover, volunteering in schools is also linked to a greater possibility of students engaging in future community service and service-oriented professions.

According to Seah, “pre-registered healthcare students, when equipped with the right skills and knowledge, can render great support to the formal healthcare workforce.”⁵ Nursing students grabbed the chance to volunteer as they believed that this experience could hone and nurture their nursing skills even make them stand out. A study by the Center for Economic Policy Research found that “volunteering is in fact associated with a significant improvement in job prospects.” Student volunteers identified volunteering as a great opportunity to apply nursing knowledge and skills in “real-life scenarios”. They looked forward to seeking “new, interesting, and meaningful learning experiences”.⁵ Volunteer work can highlight one’s abilities, skills, and sense of altruism especially if he/she is a novice nurse. Volunteering is seen as an act of compassion since it is done for the greater good of the community rather than for personal gain. Most of the respondents were also aware of the advantages of volunteering and what it could mean for their career prospects. They also saw volunteering as an opportunity to gain more knowledge and improve their skill and expertise in nursing. Volunteering for them

was considered a chance for them to simultaneously strengthen their abilities and credentials for their future.

Volunteering gave students the feeling of taking part in the fight against the pandemic, which provided them with self-satisfaction and a career-related experience.¹⁴ Through volunteering, student nurses lent their time and skills to help in vaccination programs. The participants felt joy since they had the opportunity to help and use their nursing skills and gain new experiences. They felt a sense of satisfaction and fulfilment through these volunteer programs. Despite the venues being far from their homes, the student nurses still felt motivated to join the volunteer programs. The tasks of these volunteers ranged from doing paperwork, monitoring patients to vaccinating. Participants expressed that they felt that volunteering was fulfilling despite the workload being tedious and exhausting. Although nursing students expressed how difficult the situation had been, they saw their experiences as a source of personal and professional growth, which led to the sense of fulfillment.

The findings from the study suggest that despite the lack of experience of working as frontliners during the COVID-19 vaccination programs, nursing students volunteered for personal motivations and perceived benefits and outcomes. Personal motivations included improving their skills as a nurse, having the desire to help others driven by innate altruism, past volunteering experiences that led to the desire to volunteer again, and the opportunity to advocate against vaccine hesitancy. In addition, respondents also expressed their own perceived benefits and outcomes such as the feeling of satisfaction and fulfillment from doing volunteer work, having the opportunity to interact with patients, and viewing their experience in volunteering as something that could be helpful in their future careers.

The study findings also show similarities between the motivation of Filipino nursing students to volunteer, as well as with the motivation of student nurses in other countries such as Japan, Spain, and Singapore, specifically their altruism and dedication to provide assistance. The interviews were carried out online which resulted in internet connectivity-related issues in certain interviews. This also restricted the group from fully understanding the nonverbal cues observed during the interview.

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