

# Indonesian Students' Reasons for Choosing to Study Nursing: A Phenomenological Study

**Joko Gunawan**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6694-8679>  
Chulalongkorn University,  
Faculty of Nursing, Thailand  
jokogunawan2015@gmail.com

**Yupin Aunguroch**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9205-1814>  
Chulalongkorn University,  
Faculty of Nursing, Thailand  
yupin.a@chula.ac.th

**Ade Sukarna**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4943-0450>  
Akademi Keperawatan Pemerintah  
Kabupaten Belitung, Indonesia  
ade.sukarna@yahoo.co.id

**Nazliansyah Nazliansyah**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7017-360X>  
Akademi Keperawatan Pemerintah  
Kabupaten Belitung, Indonesia  
anazfadhlan@gmail.com

**Ferry Efendi**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7988-9196>  
Airlangga University,  
Faculty of Nursing, Indonesia  
ferry-e@fkip.unair.ac.id

## Abstract

Many Indonesian nurses face uncertain placement owing to the low absorptive capacity of the public and private sector health facilities, which may influence new students to choose nursing as a career. Thus, determining students' reasons for choosing to study nursing remains important to help nursing educators develop programmes to retain them in the nursing profession. This study aimed to determine why new students choose to enter the nursing profession. This was a phenomenological study using focus group discussions with twenty nursing diploma students who were selected to participate in this study at the beginning of their first year of study. Van Manen's thematic analysis method was used for the data analysis. The findings revealed five themes associated with the reasons to study nursing among Indonesian students, namely (i) conscience to help family and others, (ii) inspiration by nurses, (iii) desire to improve the nursing image, (iv) parental and family influence, and (v) opportunities to work and study abroad. These findings help nursing educators to further understand what drives students, which can be used to improve retention strategies for upcoming and future nursing generations in Indonesia.

**Keywords:** choosing nursing; nursing students; nursing education; qualitative research

## **Background**

In Indonesia, the number of nurses has been increasing year by year. It can be seen from the expansion of the number of nursing schools, from 409 nursing schools in 2004 to 733 schools in 2014 (AIPNI-AINEC 2015). Approximately 30 000 nurses qualify per year, and currently there are 237.5 million people in Indonesia who are served by 220 004 nurses (Gunawan and Aunguroch 2015), which are expected to fulfil the need of society to improve their health conditions.

That number also reveals that the Government of Indonesia needs to invest more in providing job opportunities for Indonesian nurses. But, in fact, the total absorptive capacity of the public and private health sector still remains low, which is shown in the ability of absorbing only 3 000 nurses per year (Gunawan and Aunguroch 2015). Therefore there are many nurses who do not find the right place to work or who are uncertain about placement opportunities on completion of their nursing training.

As a result, students may think twice about choosing nursing as their career. However, nursing is still a favourite major for new students in Indonesia. The increased number of students who apply to Indonesian universities, especially to the Belitung Nursing Academy, is approximately 100–300 students, and 50 new students are accepted per year (AKPER Belitung 2016). The Belitung Nursing Academy is the only nursing education institution that offers a diploma course in nursing in Belitung Island, Indonesia. It may be one of the reasons why students still choose nursing. However, there is no evidence to support this assumption. Thus, the reasons why students undertake a nursing degree remain unexplored.

Literature indicates that the reasons for entering nursing include caring for people, nursing as a rewarding career, nursing as a stepping stone to another career, family history of working in the health sector, previous work or socialisation experiences, the ease of securing the job, and an interest in medicine or biology (Elibol and Seren 2017; Marcinowicz et al. 2016; Wilkes, Cowin, and Johnson 2015). However, there is still a dearth of studies exploring students' reasons for choosing a nursing programme in the Indonesian context. This study was conducted to explore and to describe the perceptions of undergraduate students regarding nursing and their reasons for choosing nursing as a career, so that the nursing programme managers can improve the courses that would guide the students to sustain motivation, trigger more enthusiasm and retain them in the nursing profession.

## **Research Question**

This study was aimed at answering the following research question:

What are Indonesian undergraduate students' reasons for choosing nursing as a career?

## **Methods**

### **Study Design**

This was a phenomenological study to investigate undergraduate students' reasons for undertaking a nursing programme as their career option. Using a phenomenological study design was congruent with the purpose of this study which was to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study, namely the choice of a career in nursing.

### **Study Setting**

This study was conducted at the Belitung Nursing Academy (Akademi Keperawatan Pemerintah Kabupaten Belitung) as it is the only nursing institution in Belitung Island, Indonesia. This institution offers a three-year diploma programme in nursing.

### **Sample**

The study sample consisted of 20 nursing students in the first semester of the first year of their study selected using purposive sampling. There was no age and gender restriction of participants in this study. The students were contacted through a phone call and short message service (SMS) to invite them to participate in the study.

### **Data Collection**

Ethical clearance was sought and obtained for this study through the *Kesatuan Bangsa Perlindungan Masyarakat* or Government Institution of Society Protection in Belitung (Approval Number: 070/219.a/BKBPPB/2015), and the study permission from the Belitung Nursing Academy. Before data collection, students were recruited and informed about the purpose of the study. They were assured that participation in the study was voluntary. Moreover, they were able to voluntarily withdraw from the study. The researchers guaranteed the confidentiality of their data and also assured them that their information would be published anonymously. The participants' names were not used in the presentation of the results. In the end, the researchers asked the participants to read and sign an informed consent form. Data were collected between July 2015 and August 2015. Focus group discussions (FGDs) were held with 20 nursing students with a duration that ranged between 60 to 120 minutes. The language of choice during the FGDs was Indonesian or the Belitung language. The FGDs were audiotaped to ensure that all the discussions were captured. The participants in this study were initially asked an open-ended question: "Why did you choose nursing as a career?"

## **Data Analysis**

Interpretive phenomenology, as outlined by Van Manen (2016), was used for the data analysis with the following steps: (i) carefully reviewing the texts as a whole and attempting to understand the overall meaning, (ii) highlighting or selecting phrases and statements that seemed essential to the study, (iii) developing the keywords and concepts dialogue within the texts, (iv) interpreting all keywords from components of experience to the whole experience and back again, (v) analysing every sentence, and discovering essential themes, and (vi) reconstructing all themes into a description of the perceptions of the respondents. All of the themes were then translated into English. The primary author (JG) provided the first translation, which was then agreed to by the other co-researchers in this study.

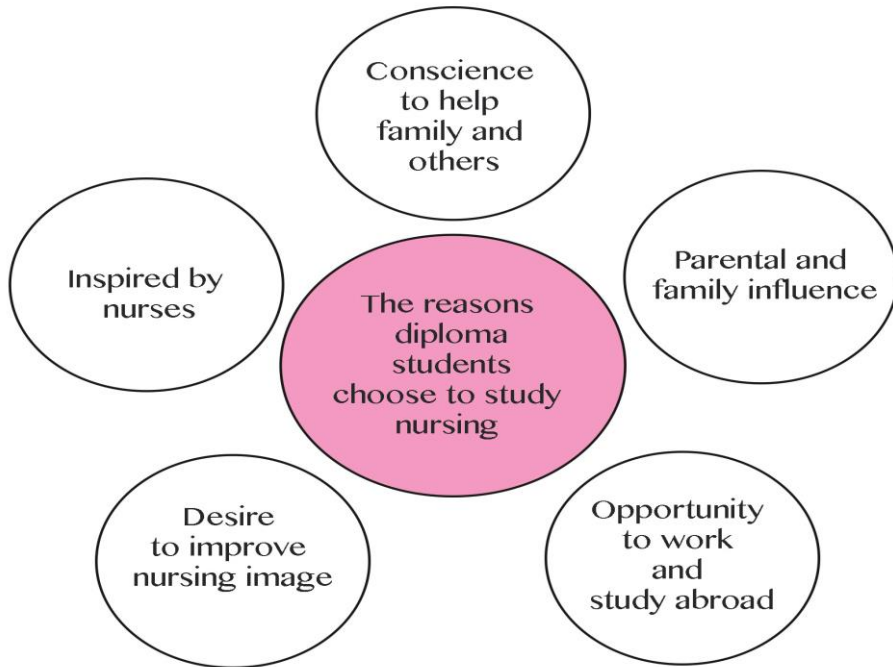
## **Rigour**

Issues of rigour were dealt with through internal member checking during the interview by the principal investigator and through the verification of the data collected from the students. The peer review was done by an independent person or an experienced researcher to compare and contrast all data collected, including field notes that documented all the methodological issues and decisions made by the researcher in order to ensure the quality of data interpretations. Although the interviewer or principal investigators were mostly Indonesian nurses, bracketing was ensured by discussing personal biases and experiences with the research topic among the researchers (Gunawan 2015).

## **Results**

A total of 20 participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that relevant data were collected. The participants consisted of 8 male students (40%) and 12 female students (60%). All the participants were born in Belitung, Indonesia, with their ages ranging from 19 to 22 years.

Five themes emerged from the data analysis using Van Manen's (2016) thematic approach. These were: conscience to help family and others, inspiration by nurses, desire to improve the nursing image, parental and family influence, and the opportunity to work and study abroad (See Figure 1). Those themes are illustrated below with exemplars from the participants' stories using pseudonyms for the participants.



**Figure 1:** The five themes of the study

**Theme 1: Conscience to help family and others**

More than half of the students agreed that they chose to study nursing because of their conscience to help their family and others. It was indicated that the students have a good inner sense about nursing. Participants expressed this in the following statements:

I study nursing because my heart calls to help other people ... (F1)

There is no one who forces me to study nursing; it is from my heart to help people ... (F5)

I have an intention to study nursing because I feel sorry for the sick people, so if I become a nurse I can help and make them happy ... (F10)

Other participants expressed their consciences to help their family in the following statements:

Nursing would satisfy me in caring for my family according to their needs and seeing them with better health ... (F19)

Taking care of my family is my best reason. I don't want to spend money because of family members being sick ... (F20)

I can ask my Dad to stop smoking if I become nurse, I will explain to him the dangers of smoking for the body ... (F6)

A conscience is a servant of an individual's value system producing a strong sense of right and wrong. To get a strong conscience in nursing, one may have to get involved over a long period. Two of the participants said:

I have been interested in nursing profession since I was a child because my Mom is a nurse. I believe this profession will give me a chance to help people mentally and physically. (F7)

I am so happy if I can help improving the health condition of my family, my parents; and the way to make it come true is to be a nurse. (F16)

## **Theme 2: Inspired by nurses**

Some of students chose nursing because nurses in the hospital inspire them. It may involve real social interaction with nurses in any kind of situations. Two participants said:

I am interested to study and become a nurse because I had an experience to accompany my grandmother in the hospital and I found a great nurse there. I wonder why they are skilful, I need to know how they know about the disease and how to take care of the patients ... (F1)

I have visited my family in the hospital, and I found my family talking with one nurse with high confidence and convinced my family to stay stronger and be patient. I was motivated to be that kind of nurse too. (F15)

The participants also view nurses in a positive way that motivates new students to help people through the nursing profession. A participant (F2) said:

Nurses are wearing white uniform, good looking, skilful, and clean. So I would like to be nurse too.

Two participants added:

I was inspired by nurses who always keep their smile and beauty ... (F7)

To be nurse seems cool for me, they are smart and handsome. (F19)

### **Theme 3: Desire to improve the nursing image**

The third theme the participants identified was the desire to improve the nursing image. This desire indicated that the participants have a good intention to make the nursing image better, especially in Belitung. However, it may tell more about the state of the nursing profession, which may not be good enough in the eyes of society. The participants expressed this in the following statements:

Some people and maybe other professions underestimate nurses, so I want to fix that image to be better because nurses are great. (F3)

The image of nursing in Belitung is not really good, so we are as the future of nurses need to fix it ... (F8)

I have intention to improve the image of nursing to be better than now ... (F4)

The participants also expressed the view that people might not understand the work of nurses so they were willing to use the media to show how good nurses are. Two participants said:

As I know, nurse is a very great profession, but some people may not know about it. So, I choose to study nursing to show them that nurses are coming with good vision, to help people. We can tell and show them in social media using Internet ... (F11)

My desire to choose nursing is because I always see a growing interest into nursing as it strikes as a satisfying career to choose. The point now is how to make nursing exist in society, and I am willing to provide my confidence and skills for others. (F20)

Another student (F15) said that nurses could work everywhere because people like people who help people:

I am so happy to study nursing and I need to tell others to study nursing as the best career choice. They deserve to know about it. Nurses can work anywhere because they are needed.

To be a nurse is not easy. Nurses are demanded to work professionally although it is a tiring profession. But people may still look down on nurses. In fact, they are lucky to still have nurses to take care of them. A participant (F19) expressed this in the following statement:

I always look at nurses with respect. I believe their roles are very challenging and tiring. So, people are lucky still having nurses to help them. People need to know what

nurses can do for society. They just don't know about it and listen only the bad side of nurses ...

#### **Theme 4: Parental and family influence**

The fourth theme that participants identified was parental and family influence, which indicated that students choose nursing because of their parents and families. Some students might not have any intentions to study nursing, but are requested by their parents to obtain a degree. However, students then learn to enjoy nursing. Two participants expressed this in the following statements:

I don't want to be a nurse, but my parents force me to study nursing because my parents said that to be a nurse is a good career in the future ... (F4)

My mom is a nurse, and she wants me to be a nurse although I have no intention to choose it. But gradually during studying at the first year, I enjoy nursing much. (F13)

Parents and families believe that nursing can bring a brighter future for their children with added benefits wherever they go. Parents and families also think that nursing will be useful in the world. Some participants expressed this in the following statements:

My mom believes that if I become nurse, my future will be brighter because I can work everywhere. (F15)

My dad needs me to take care of him and other families, in order to do that, they want me to study nursing ... (F16)

All of my families want me to be a nurse, because this profession has always been useful in the world and hereafter ... (F18)

#### **Theme 5: Opportunities to work and study abroad**

Working and studying abroad are also viewed as a reason for undertaking a nursing degree, as expressed in the following statements from some of the participants:

I have a friend who is working abroad as a nurse, he told me about many benefits of working overseas. I feel motivated and therefore I also want to be a nurse. (F11)

My teacher is studying in Thailand, nursing brings him there. I am jealous and want to be like him. (F14)

Some of my nursing friends work in Kuwait and Arab. Some of them also have a chance to be a nurse to accompany Muslim people for pilgrim. I am jealous and that's why I want to be a nurse ... (F5)



## **Discussion**

This study was conducted qualitatively to explore the perspectives of nursing students who choose nursing for their study and career. Five themes emerged from the data, namely conscience to help family and others, inspiration by nurses, a desire to improve the nursing image, parental and family influence, and opportunities to work and study abroad.

The theme “conscience to help family and others” indicated that students choose nursing from their hearts to help people. They are willing to study nursing without any pressures. It is consistent with previous studies that revealed that students enter the nursing profession because they view nursing as a caring and altruistic profession, concerned primarily with the aiding of others who cannot fend for themselves (Marcinowicz et al. 2016; Price, McGillis Hall, Lalonde, et al. 2013; Wilkes, Cowin, and Johnson 2015). This reason is defined as what they can do for others as nurses (care, help, make well, contribute to society and community) (Neilson and McNally 2013; Seren, Bacaksiz, and Baykal 2017). Participants in this study shared that taking care of family is the best reason to study nursing. They are able to do something useful for others in holistic ways through a caring and compassionate profession, which is in line with previous studies which indicated that students choose nursing because they need human contact, the opportunity to help others, and the feeling of doing something useful (Price, McGillis Hall, Lalonde, et al. 2013; Usher et al. 2013; Wilkes, Cowin, and Johnson 2015). The literature also showed that individuals often hold traditional views of nurses and often regard nursing first and foremost as a caring, compassionate and nurturing profession (Crick, Perkinson, and Davies 2014; Price, McGillis Hall, et al. 2013).

The theme “inspiration by nurses” showed the positive side of nurses in Belitung, Indonesia. It is because new students are motivated by the work of nurses to choose the nursing programme for their career. It can be assumed that nursing is the best choice for students. It concurs with previous studies which revealed that students are interested in studying nursing because nurses work closely with society, they make a major contribution to society, and nursing is an interesting and challenging job (Seren, Bacaksiz, and Baykal 2017; Usher et al. 2013).

The participants expressed the view that they were interested in nursing because they had social interaction with nurses when visiting a hospitalised family member. This finding is consistent with previous studies which revealed that nursing as a career choice was also influenced through the direct observation of nurses who were actively engaged in nursing practice, or knowing other nurses (being impressed by the work of nurses) in real-life situations or having experienced the healthcare system (Price, McGillis Hall, et al. 2013). Observing the nursing care of hospitalised family members has also been cited as a reason for choosing nursing (Liaw et al. 2017). Thus, this

finding of this study indicates that nursing is viewed as an admirable profession to care and help others and is therefore translated into a desire of students to be a nurse. However, this may be in contrast to the findings of previous studies which stated that although the students expressed admiration for the work of nurses as caring and helping others, they often described the work of nurses regarding their responsibilities, status, image, pay and work conditions, in undesirable terms (Neilson and McNally 2013; Ogunyewo et al. 2014).

The theme “desire to improve the nursing image” showed the good intention of the students for the future of nursing. Participants shared that the nursing image in Belitung, Indonesia, was not good in the eyes of society. Therefore they wanted to improve the image of nursing as a noble profession for the benefit of the community. However, students may decide not to become nurses because of the negative perceptions of nursing. The nursing image and consequent respect from society are regarded as the factor influencing students to choose nursing as a career (Tseng, Wang, and Weng 2013). This study found that when students chose nursing, they knew that it was an important profession. Students’ reason for improving the nursing image can be seen as the strong beliefs of students regarding the nursing profession before they enter the educational programme (Crick, Perkinson, and Davies 2014).

The participants also described that some people might not understand “real” nurses and what nurses do for society. The use of media through the Internet can be the solution to improve the nursing image because the image of nursing had often been informed and influenced by the stereotypical portrayal of nurses in culture and the media (Marcinowicz et al. 2016). The media really influence the image of nursing, thus the profession needs to understand how to advertise nursing to give it more exposure (Finkelman and Kenner 2013). The media can confer status on issues, persons, organisations, or social movements by singling them out for attention. Audiences apparently subscribe to the circular reasoning that if something matters, it will be the focus of mass media attention (Ten Hoeve, Jansen, and Roodbol 2014).

The theme “parental and family influence” indicated that nursing students’ choices are influenced by their parents and family members. It concurs with the findings of some studies which revealed that nursing student’s career choices are informed and influenced through interactions with others, especially family, friends, and role models (Marcinowicz et al. 2016; Wu et al. 2015).

Some of the participants expressed that nursing was not their first choice, but although they chose nursing as an alternative choice, none of them regretted the choice of a nursing career. However, parents and family play an important role in influencing the choice of a nursing career for their children. It is consistent with the previous studies which indicated that students are influenced by family and/or boyfriends and

girlfriends (Marcinowicz et al. 2016), or that students' significant others can deter them from choosing nursing (Wilkes, Cowin, and Johnson 2015).

The theme "opportunities to study and work abroad" indicated that the participants see a nursing career opportunity not only in Indonesia, but also overseas. There is a global demand for nurses and therefore the opportunities for nurses to work and study abroad are open. The participants also expressed that some nurses have a chance to go to Saudi Arabia to accompany Muslims on their pilgrimages. So, nursing is regarded as a stepping stone to travelling, as the literature mentioned that a degree in nursing is seen as a "passport to travel" (Marcinowicz et al. 2016).

The limitation of this study was that the study setting did not cover all the regions in Indonesia. Therefore, it is recommended that future research increase the sample representation. A survey study with a bigger sample size would offer a greater possibility and variety of factors influencing students to choose nursing as their future career. For nursing educators, it is important to continue developing curricula based on the nursing care philosophy. The opinions of new students in this study indicate that nursing educators should provide strategies to keep students' motivation by discussing the idea of nursing, and encouraging students to express their aspirations.

The findings in this study are unique, especially the reasons of "inspiration by nurses" and "desire to improve the nursing image" that are different from the findings of previous studies. This may contribute to institutions' advertising of nursing as a good career, facilitating nursing students to promote nursing, and developing nursing media as a subject in nursing.

## **Conclusion**

This study determined why undergraduate nursing students choose nursing as their career option. The FGDs revealed that a conscience to help family and others remains the predominant reason for choosing nursing, while they were also inspired by the caring and compassionate work of nurses. However, the image of nursing in Belitung might not be good in the eyes of the community and therefore students have a desire to improve the nursing image as another reason for choosing nursing because they know the work of nurses is challenging. In this study it was also found that nursing was not the first choice of career for some participants. They were influenced by their parents and families who believe that nursing is a better career choice for the future. Finally, nursing is viewed as a passport for studying, working, and travelling abroad, which is regarded as the most influential reason for choosing nursing as a career.

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