A DECADE OF SERVICE: THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MILLENNIAL NURSES WHO OPTED TO STAY IN THE COUNTRY

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Abstract

This hermeneutic phenomenological study examines the real-life stories of millennial nurses in the Philippines who chose to stay in their country instead of working abroad, filling an important gap in research about why nurses stay or leave. With the world facing a nursing shortage and the Philippines struggling with many skilled workers leaving, the research asks why some nurses resist moving overseas. Focusing on an area with overstretched healthcare services, the study included 15 millennial nurses, 10 assigned to special care areas and 5 in non-special areas, through detailed interviews and group discussions. Using van Manen's method to study lived experiences, three key themes emerged: (1) Reality of Staying, where family bonds, cultural comfort, and job satisfaction keep nurses rooted; (2) Generational Dissonance, revealing clashes between younger nurses and older systems, including understaffing, low pay, and pandemic stress; and (3) Adaptation and Existential Fulfillment, showing how nurses build resilience through community service, learning, and faith. The findings challenge common beliefs about migration by highlighting how these nurses find purpose in local work, even when the system fails to support them. The study calls for urgent policy changes to keep nurses by improving pay, working conditions, and respecting their cultural and social values.

Keywords: *Social Science, Millennial Nurses, Hermeneutic-Phenomenology, Tagum City*

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Introduction

The global healthcare system faces a critical nursing workforce crisis, exacerbated by mass migration and systemic imbalances. Internationally, the World Health Organization (WHO) warns of a severe projected shortage of nurses, with low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) disproportionately affected by the loss of skilled professionals to "brain drain" (Marufu et al., 2021). In the Philippines, a leading exporter of nursing talent, the majority of licensed nurses seek employment abroad due to stark disparities in wages and working conditions (Ortiga et al., 2022), straining domestic healthcare capacity. Yet, a counterintuitive trend emerges despite this widespread outflow, some nurses choose to remain motivated

by intertwined socio-cultural and professional factors. This phenomenon remains understudied, particularly among millennial nurses, whose generational values and economic realities create distinct tensions in career choices.

Globally, studies reveal that nurses who resist migration often prioritize familial bonds and national duty over financial incentives. In Indonesia, Hamid et al. (2023) found that nurses stay due to patriarchal norms, social stigma against migrant women, and emotional ties to local communities. Similarly, Slovakian nurses cite job satisfaction and national pride as retention factors, despite Europe's competitive wages (Mozolová & Tupá, 2024). These findings contrast with the prevailing narrative of nurse migration as an inevitable economic strategy, highlighting a critical gap: the lack of comparative research on nurses who defy migration trends and the intersectional factors shaping their choices.

In the Philippines, the retention of nurses is often framed as a moral dilemma between economic survival and patriotic service. Ortiga (2022) identifies "push-pull factors" such as persistently low salaries and chronic hospital understaffing yet notes that millennial nurses increasingly prioritize work-life balance and professional development within the country. Alameddine et al. (2023) further highlights the influence of cultural identity, where deep-seated familial obligations (utang na loob) and strong community ties bind nurses to local practice. However, these studies predominantly focus on urban centers like Manila, overlooking regional healthcare settings where systemic inequities are even more pronounced.

In Tagum City, Davao del Norte, the absence of localized research obscures the realities of nurses who choose to remain despite abundant opportunities for overseas employment. As the region's primary government hospital contends with severely strained nurse staffing levels (Davao Regional Medical Center, 2023), understanding the lived experiences of millennial nurses, who navigate complex tensions between professional aspirations and familial-cultural obligations, becomes critically important. Their narratives could reveal alternative retention strategies, such as culturally grounded approaches or enhanced institutional support systems, to help address the Philippines' persistent nursing workforce challenges.

Focusing specifically on nurses working in a Davao del Norte hospital, this study will provide a nuanced understanding of a phenomenon that contrasts sharply with the prevailing trend of nurse migration (Ortiga et al., 2022). The study will illuminate the values, motivations, and challenges that characterize this understudied population, offering insights that may inform healthcare workforce retention strategies in regional Philippine contexts (Alameddine et al., 2023). Through in-depth exploration of these counter-migration narratives, the research seeks to contribute to broader discussions about nurse retention, professional identity, and healthcare system sustainability in developing nations (Marufu et al., 2021).

This study will utilize the Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics. This theory is anchored on historical context and preconceived notion of the participants and respondents for effective meaning-making. Artha (2024) stated that this philosophy ensures the historical and empirical accuracy of the data that will be collected from the respondents advocating for meaningful dialogue and ethical deliberation.

Another theory is Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology. This theory is focused on 'being-on-the-field' observation of a certain phenomenon. This second theory is characterized as an effective lens emphasizing the significance of time and existence. It innovatively transforms phenomenological concepts, integrating them with hermeneutics to explore human experience and understanding within the broader context of 20th-century continental philosophy (Xiaogang, 2024). The third theory that will be utilized in this study will be Van Manen's Hermeneutic Phenomenology (Mel, 2024). His theory emphasizes understanding lived experiences through interpretation, focusing on the essence of phenomena. It encourages deep listening to personal narratives, allowing individuals to navigate and articulate their experiences, fostering empowerment and transformation in the research process.

Methods

This study employed a hermeneutic-phenomenology research approach. According to Moustakas (1994), phenomenology is a qualitative research method that leans on exploring and understanding the importance and structure of an individual's lived experiences. In this study, phenomenology served as the guiding framework for the in-depth exploration of the varied experiences of millennial nurses who opted to stay in the country despite the offers and opportunities to work abroad.

Furthermore, this study used an in-depth interview for data gathering, which provided a significant amount of information from the participants. The integration of phenomenology and qualitative data approaches was fundamental to this research design. This approach ensured that the data collected reflected the essence and meaning of the participants' lived experiences that influenced their decision to work abroad.

Moreover, this study was conducted in Tagum City, Davao del Norte (Figure 1), a strategic location for data collection due to its high concentration of employed nurses and status as a healthcare hub in the region. Known as "The City of Palms," Tagum is situated in the southernmost part of Davao del Norte and hosts seven operational health institutions, from which participants were purposively selected. Notably, the city was home to the region's largest government-funded hospital, further reinforcing its relevance as an ideal setting for this research. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews conducted in one of the city's hospitals, ensuring direct access to the lived experiences of millennial nurses within their professional environment.

The informants for this study consisted of millennial nurses working in

various hospitals across Tagum City who meet the following criteria: (a) at least 10 years of clinical experience, (b) aged 30–43 years old (falling within the millennial generation), and (c) have chosen to remain in the Philippines despite receiving opportunities to work abroad. These inclusion criteria ensured that participants possess substantial professional experience and firsthand insights into the study's central focus, retention motivations among seasoned millennial nurses.

To comprehensively capture nurses' experiences, the study employed two complementary data collection methods: in-depth individual interviews and focus group discussions with separate participant cohorts. The study gathered primary data through two distinct but complementary methods: semi-structured individual interviews followed by online focus group discussions. This study employed Van Manen's Six-Step Approach, beginning with an immersive engagement with participants' narratives.

The study derived all research data from semi-structured interviews conducted with millennial nurses. To ensure the instrument's validity, the interview questionnaire underwent rigorous evaluation by a three-member expert panel. These validators, all holding PhD qualifications with extensive experience in qualitative research methodologies, assessed the questionnaire's ability to effectively capture the required data. This validation process served to establish the instrument's reliability and appropriateness for investigating the study's core phenomena.

This study employed Van Manen's Six-Step Approach, beginning with an immersive engagement with participants' narratives. As both researcher and fellow nurse, the researcher brings valuable insider perspective to this analysis, while maintaining rigorous reflexivity about how my own clinical experiences might shape interpretation. The process unfolds through several carefully considered phases: listening deeply to participants' stories with fresh curiosity, setting aside assumptions to hear their authentic perspectives, identifying significant patterns that reveal the essence of their experiences, crafting rich descriptions that capture the uniqueness of each nurse's journey, maintaining focus on both individual narratives and their collective meaning, consistently checking interpretations against the data through peer review and reflection, and weaving together the parts to reveal a coherent understanding of the whole phenomenon.

The hermeneutic circle guided the process, continuously moving between close examination of individual accounts and broader consideration of their shared meanings. This back-and-forth analysis ensures findings remain grounded in the data while reaching deeper conceptual understanding. What makes this approach particularly valuable for nursing research is its dual focus: it honors the subjective reality of clinical experience while providing systematic methods to transform personal stories into professional insights. By combining rigorous analysis with artful interpretation, the study aims to produce findings that are both intellectually substantive and deeply human capturing

not just what nurses do, but what their work truly means to them.

Results and Discussions

This chapter presented the findings and interpretations of the study exploring millennial nurses' lived experiences in choosing to remain in their home country despite opportunities abroad. Through hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the results revealed key themes that illuminated the professional, personal, and socio-cultural dimensions of this decision-making process. The discussion contextualized these findings within existing literature on nurse migration, generational workforce dynamics, and healthcare retention strategies, bridging participants' narratives with broader theoretical and practical implications. By intertwining empirical results with critical reflection, this chapter not only answered the research questions but also opened new avenues for understanding nurse retention in an era of global mobility.

The study employed purposive sampling to select millennial nurses who met carefully defined inclusion criteria, focusing on those with extensive local clinical experience who had consciously chosen to forgo opportunities to work abroad. Participants were recruited to ensure representation across different clinical specialties and career stages within the millennial generation.

Table 1: Participant's Profile

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Years of Experience	Unit	Highest Education
P1	40	F	16	ICU	IDI 1
P2	33	F	13	ICU	IDI 2
P3	40	F	14	ICU	IDI 3
P4	36	F	10	Ward	IDI 4
P5	34	F	10	ICU	IDI 5
P6	35	F	13	Ward	IDI 6
P7	37	F	15	Ward	IDI 7
P8	46	F	23	Ward	IDI 8
P9	36	F	10	Hemodialysis Unit	IDI 9
P10	40	F	10	ICU	IDI 10

P11	39	F	13	ICU	FGD 1
P12	39	F	18	OR	FGD 2
P13	36	F	10	Ward	FGD 3
P14	38	F	15	ICU	FGD 4
P15	38	F	11	ICU	FGD 5

This study involved 15 millennial nurses, all identifying as female, with ages ranging from 33 to 46 years and professional experience spanning 10 to 23 years. The group may be divided into two categories based on their unit assignments: 10 nurses worked in specialized care areas, while 5 were stationed in non-specialized general wards.

Among those in specialized units, eight were assigned to Intensive Care Units (ICU), one to the Operating Room, and one to the Hemodialysis Unit. Nurses in these roles had between 10 to 18 years of experience, with P12 standing out as the most seasoned in specialized care at 18 years. Meanwhile, the non-specialized group worked in general ward units, where experience levels varied widely.

Van Manen's approach emphasizes interpretive engagement with lived experiences through thematic analysis. From 180 participant responses (derived from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions), 197 significant statements were extracted. These statements were verbatim expressions that captured the nurses' core experiences, emotions, and decision-making processes regarding their choice to stay in the country.

Van Manen's method involves holistic, selective, and detailed line-by-line reading to identify recurring patterns. The analysis followed these steps: immersive engagement with the full dataset to grasp the overarching narratives, identification of phrases that revealed key insights about retention and breaking down responses into 197 significant statements that reflected van Manen's lifeworld existentials. The significant statements were synthesized into 10 cluster themes, which were further distilled into 3 overarching emergent themes:

The analysis began with a meticulous examination of 180 raw participant responses gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Using van Manen's phenomenological approach, the researcher engaged in line-by-line coding to identify 197 significant statements that captured the essence of millennial nurses' lived experiences. This process involved extracting poignant, verbatim phrases like "My salary is low, but my patients' gratitude keeps me going," which revealed the complex interplay between professional challenges and personal fulfillment.

To ensure the authenticity of interpretation, the researcher practiced bracketing, consciously setting aside researcher preconceptions to prioritize participants' unfiltered perspectives.

Each statement was then aligned with van Manen's lifeworld existentials, creating a structured framework for understanding retention decisions: statements about family obligations (e.g., "I could earn more abroad, but who will care for my parents?") were categorized under Relationality, while reflections on physical exhaustion or workplace conditions fell under Corporeality and Spatiality, respectively. This rigorous process transformed fragmented narratives into a coherent dataset, where even a single response like the example above crystallized into the significant statement "Filial duty overrides financial incentives for migration," epitomizing the relational tensions central to retention choices. Through this method, raw data became meaningful units of analysis, preserving the emotional and contextual richness of participants' stories while allowing systematic theme development.

The three emergent themes - Reality of Staying, Generational Dissonance, and Adaptation and Existential Fulfillment - emerged through a rigorous hermeneutic phenomenological process that progressively transformed participants' lived experiences into higher-order understandings. Our interpretive journey began by examining how the ten cluster themes interconnected across van Manen's existential domains, revealing profound relationships between nurses' relational bonds and workplace attachments, as well as between their deferred career aspirations and physical exhaustion. These connections naturally coalesced around three core experiential patterns: the conscious choice to remain (Being-Present), resistance against systemic challenges (Being-Against), and transcendence of limitations (Being-Beyond).

Through iterative analysis, the researcher distilled each theme's essence using three complementary lenses. Horizonal analysis uncovered how nurses' temporal perspectives shaped their experiences, while the existential flip revealed their remarkable capacity to transform struggles into sources of strength. Generational positioning further clarified how millennial nurses' narratives differed from those of other cohorts. The first theme, Reality of Staying, crystallized from cluster themes about familial bonds, professional fulfillment, and cultural comfort, exposing retention as an active process of world-building rather than passive remaining. Generational Dissonance emerged from the synthesis of systemic challenges, financial strain, and pandemic burdens, capturing nurses' paradoxical ability to endure while finding meaning in their suffering. Finally, Adaptation and Existential Fulfillment wove together transcendence, spiritual trust, growth, and civic duty, demonstrating how nurses alchemized hardship into purpose.

Emergent Theme 1: Lived Reality of Staying

This theme elucidates the existential decision-making of millennial nurses who consciously choose to remain in their home country despite lucrative opportunities abroad (Oducado et al., 2021). This theme reflects the reseacher's own journey of choosing to remain in the Philippines. Similar to many participants, the researche perceive his role not merely as employment but as a meaningful commitment rooted in personal values and a sense of purpose. The concept of "lived throughness," as articulated by Van Manen (1990), aptly captures this experience of immersing themselves in the realities of Filipino healthcare, facing resource limitations, systemic issues, and emotional labor, yet finding fulfillment in the service they provide. The decision to stay aligns with the understanding that personal meaning and cultural identity often outweigh lucrative opportunities abroad, especially when familial and community bonds are strong. In contemporary research, this phenomenon has been shown to transcend geographical boundaries, with nurses around the globe increasingly prioritizing a sense of meaning and purpose in their work over financial remuneration (Urbaite, 2020).

Cluster Theme 1.1 Familial Presence as Professional Anchor

The first Cluster Theme Familial Presence as Professional Anchor highlights how nurses frequently prioritize kinship ties and intergenerational care when deciding to remain in their home country. This framing positions their choice as an active commitment to family obligations rather than a passive resignation to less favorable circumstances (Cranley, 2021). Many nurses describe their close relationships with parents, siblings, and extended family as crucial emotional anchors, instrumental in creating a sense of duty and belonging that consistently outweighs potential financial incentives abroad (Ismaili Zejnullahu, 2021).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

I chose to work here in the Philippines because of my family. No amount of money can replace being with them. (SS 3, IDI 6, Lines 19 to 20)

That's why I have no plans of going abroad, as long as I can always be with my family. (SS 6, IDI 1, Lines 52 to 53)

The depth of this commitment is further illustrated by participants' long-term perspective: nurses view their professional choices through the lens of lifelong family relationships rather than temporary economic calculations. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in collectivist cultures like the Philippines, where family cohesion is central to personal identity (Rai et al., 2021). Parental responsibilities also factor significantly into retention decisions. Filipino nurse-parents often prioritize direct involvement in child-rearing over career advancement abroad, viewing their presence as crucial for moral guidance and emotional security

(Ria et al., 2023). The intergenerational nature of caregiving obligations is another key factor, as expressed. This reflects where nurses weigh career opportunities against aging parents' needs. In Filipino culture, caring for elderly parents is considered both a moral duty and a reciprocal act for childhood care received (Felipe-Dimog et al., 2024).

Cluster Theme 1.2 Cultural Disconnection at Work

The second Cluster Theme is Cultural Disconnection at Work. For many Filipino nurses, the choice to remain in their home country is influenced by factors that extend well beyond mere familial ties; it is deeply rooted in a profound sense of cultural ties (Elmaco, 2022). The Philippines, with its rich tapestry of diverse customs and traditions, offers a haven where nurses can immerse themselves in the familiar rhythms of daily life. They find solace in engaging with shared traditions, rituals, and deeply ingrained social values that are integral to their identity.

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

The comfort of the environment and being able to understand and get along with coworkers. No culture shock. (SS 34, FGD 1, Lines 135 to 136)

We don't need to adjust to a different culture, unlike when going abroad where you still have to study their language and understand their culture. Here in the Philippines, we're already used to everything. (SS 35, FGD 3, Lines 89 to 91)

The emotional security derived from being immersed in familiar customs, joyous celebrations, and supportive social networks acts as a powerful buffer against the potential isolation and cultural dislocation that often accompany work abroad (Manalo et al., 2023).

Cluster Theme 1.3 Professional Fulfillment in Local Service

The third Cluster Theme is Professional Fulfillment in Local Service. For many Filipino nurses, the decision to dedicate their careers to serving in their home country transcends the realm of mere employment; it evolves into a profound calling that is intricately linked to both national identity and professional purpose (Corpuz, 2023).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

It's when our patients appreciate us. We can see that they're truly thankful for the care we give. (SS 38, IDI 5, Lines 115 to 116)

I'm happy that I've made a significant impact in my patients' lives. (SS 39, FGD 2, Lines 138 to 139

This theme encapsulates the profound sense of purpose the researcher derives from serving the local community. Witnessing the tangible impact of his work, seeing patients recover, mentoring aspiring nurses, and contributing to community health aligns with the intrinsic motivation. The cultural fluency and personalized care one may provide foster trust and meaningful relationships, which enhance job satisfaction.

Unlike jobs abroad that may entice with higher salaries yet often come with limitations in terms of autonomy and emotional fulfillment, local practice offers Filipino nurses the opportunity to cultivate a deeper sense of purpose and meaning in their professional lives (Robredo et al., 2022). Within the familiar context of their home country, these healthcare professionals find profound satisfaction in witnessing the direct and tangible impact of their work on the lives of their patients and their communities. In local settings, nurses are not just caregivers; they are integral members of the community who play a multifaceted role in promoting health and well-being (Efendi et al., 2021).

Emergent Theme 2: Generational Dissonance

The second Emergent Theme is Generational Dissonance. Beneath the crisp white uniforms and the ever-present stethoscopes, Filipino nurses are engaged in daily battles against a myriad of systemic challenges that continuously test their resilience and tenacity (G Corpuz, 2023). While they maintain an outward appearance of professionalism and composure, the reality of their working conditions tells a different story. Chronic understaffing has become an endemic issue within many healthcare facilities, compelling nurses to manage patient loads that far exceed international standards (Pindek et al., 2025). As a result, what should be a manageable 12-hour shift transforms into a grueling marathon of physical endurance, demanding a level of emotional labor that is often unrecognized and unappreciated (Ball, 2023).

Cluster Theme 2.1 Systemic Understaffing and Nature of Work

The fifth Cluster Theme is Systemic Understaffing and Nature of Work. Systemic understaffing in Philippine healthcare institutions fundamentally alters the fabric of nursing work, creating a perfect storm of professional challenges that affects both healthcare providers and patients alike. Chronic shortages in nursing staff force nurses to routinely manage an overwhelming number of patients, often assigned to care for 15 to 20 patients each in public hospitals (Esparagoza, 2020).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

The staff workload and nurse-to-patient ratio, we really can't deny that it's imbalanced. (SS 40, IDI 2, Lines 8 to 9)

I've faced heavy workloads... and limited resources in the hospital. (SS 41, IDI 10, Lines 33 to 34)

Understaffing in the Philippine healthcare sector does not merely strain operational effectiveness; it fundamentally intensifies the emotional labor that nurses undertake as they continually stretch themselves to fill systemic gaps while striving to maintain an air of professional composure. This constant juggling act requires them to suppress their own feelings of fatigue and frustration, projecting an image of calm and competence, even in the face of overwhelming challenges (Alibudbud, 2023). Ironically, the very conditions that place such burdens on these nurses also cultivate remarkable clinical judgment and adaptability. As Filipino nurses develop the ability to make rapid, high-stakes decisions under pressure, they become adept at performing complex triage and prioritization tasks with limited resources (Valdez et al., 2024).

Cluster Theme 2.2 Financial Strain and Low Compensation

The sixth Cluster Theme is Financial Strain and Low Compensation which presents a pressing challenge for Filipino nurses who opt to remain within their home country. These dedicated healthcare professionals frequently contend with significant financial pressures exacerbated by low compensation rates, which severely impact not only their quality of life but also their overall well-being and job satisfaction (Corpuz, 2023).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

Sometimes I really struggle financially, and my salary doesn't quite cover it. It's different if you're abroad. (SS 64, FGD 4, Lines 192 to 193)

First is low salary and benefits. Compensation here is often lower compared to abroad. (SS 62, IDI 10, Lines 182 to 183)

In addition to these factors, inadequate government support significantly worsens the plight of Filipino nurses. Many healthcare institutions operate under limited budgets, which results in insufficient funding for essential services and personnel management, ultimately undermining nurses' ability to deliver quality care (Esparagoza, 2020).

Cluster Theme 2.3 Pandemic-Induced Burdens

The seventh Cluster Theme is Pandemic-Induced Burdens. The COVID-19 pandemic placed an unimaginable strain on healthcare systems worldwide, but for Filipino nurses who chose to remain in the

Philippines, this crisis not only magnified existing hardships but also introduced a slew of new, daunting challenges (Filip et al., 2022). Prior to the pandemic, these dedicated professionals were already grappling with low wages, chronic understaffing, and a lack of essential resources. However, the sudden emergence of a deadly virus thrust them into the unrelenting spotlight of a public health crisis, placing them on the frontlines with little preparation or support (Sims et al., 2022).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

Probably the most challenging was during the pandemic. It felt like there was a lack of government support for nurses like us. (SS 67, FGD 3, Lines 190 to 191)

It's really heavy being a nurse, especially during the pandemic when we were on skeletal workforce. (SS 68, IDI 8, Lines 176 to 177)

The pandemic also exposed deep systemic failures that had long been lurking beneath the surface of the healthcare system. As the government relied heavily on nurses to keep the healthcare system afloat during this unprecedented crisis, it became painfully clear how ill-equipped the system was to support its frontline warriors. Many nurses found themselves without access to proper personal protective equipment

(PPE), which left them vulnerable to contracting the virus while caring for patient (Filip et al., 2022). Despite their critical role in combating the pandemic, they were often forced to make do with inadequate supplies or even reuse masks and gowns, jeopardizing their own health and safety in the process (Alibudbud, 2023).

Emergent Theme 3: Adaptation and Existential Fulfillment

The third Emergent Theme is Adaptation and Existential Fulfillment which holds particular significance for Filipino nurses who continue to practice in the Philippines despite facing a myriad of systemic challenges that often complicate their professional and personal lives. In this context, adaptation emerges not merely as a response to external pressures but as an indispensable survival strategy that allows these healthcare professionals to navigate the complexities of their environment. They develop remarkable resilience in the face of adversity, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to their roles in an often-overstretched healthcare system (Alibudbud, 2023).

Cluster Theme 3.1 Civic Duty and Purposeful Well-Being

The eighth Cluster Theme identified in this study is Civic Duty and Purposeful Well-

Being, which resonates deeply with the experiences of many Filipino nurses who consciously choose to remain in their homeland despite encountering significant financial and systemic challenges. In this challenging landscape, a profound sense of civic duty emerges as a guiding force, enabling these dedicated professionals to transform their personal and professional struggles into a source of purposeful well-being and fulfillment (Robredo, 2022).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

I chose to stay here because happiness is really different when you're in your own country. The sense of achievement is different, especially if you're able to help your fellow Filipinos, to help Filipino citizens. (SS 93, IDI 6, Lines 363 to 365)

The important thing is that you're here, serving your country. (SS 95, IDI 8, Line 479)

Cluster Theme 3.2 Continuous Growth and Integrated Life Harmony Approaches

The ninth Cluster Theme identified in this research is Continuous Growth and Integrated Life Harmony Approaches. For Filipino nurses who consciously choose to remain in their homeland amidst ongoing challenges, professional fulfillment increasingly emanates from a commitment to continuous growth and the pursuit of integrated life harmony. This holistic approach recognizes the need to strike a balance between career development, personal well-being, and social impact, ultimately fostering a more fulfilling and meaningful existence in both their professional and personal lives (Dahl et al., 2021).

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

Work-life balance is also important, so you need to make time to breathe, get fresh air, and unwind. Then, mindset, shifting your mindset and focusing your mind. (SS 98, IDI 10, Lines 377 to 379)

Professional growth, continuous learning is key, like attending seminars, time management, and career growth, such as studying and reviewing. (SS 99, IDI 10, Lines 380 to 381)

Others cultivate interdisciplinary resilience, employing a diverse array of strategies that enable them to navigate the complexities of their work environment. Drawing from mindfulness practices, they engage in activities designed to center themselves amid the chaos of busy healthcare settings. Techniques such as meditation, deep-breathing exercises, and yoga not only help in managing stress but also promote emotional well-being, allowing nurses to approach their duties with renewed focus and clarity (Borg et al., 2022). Additionally, the establishment and maintenance of peer support networks

provide a crucial safety net where nurses can freely share their experiences, frustrations, and triumphs. These supportive relationships foster an environment of camaraderie and mutual understanding, reinforcing their sense of belonging within the healthcare community (Yasmeen et al., 2021).

Cluster Theme 3.3 Spiritual Trust

The tenth Cluster Theme is Spiritual Trust. Beyond the realms of professional dedication and personal resilience, many Filipino nurses find an unwavering source of strength in a profound sense of spiritual trust, a deep and quiet conviction that their work is imbued with divine purpose, even when faced with systemic challenges and adversities (Tingson, 2022). This spiritual trust is reflective of the nation's deeply rooted cultural heritage, which is characterized by a rich tapestry of beliefs and practices that emphasize the interconnectedness of life and the divine.

This Cluster Theme was expressed by the participants through these statements:

Just pray and trust in God through all the challenges. (SS 183, FGD 1, Lines 330 to 331)

The first and most important thing aside from family, is your spiritual aspect. You really shouldn't forget to ask for guidance in everything you do, whether at work or outside of work, because that's where we draw strength, aside from family, and it helps us have a clear mind to make decisions. (SS 184, FGD 4, Lines 337 to 339)

The interplay between spiritual trust and professional practice contributes to a holistic approach to caregiving. Nurses who nurture their spiritual lives tend to bring a heightened sense of awareness to their interactions with patients, providing compassionate care that acknowledges not only physical health but also emotional and spiritual well-being (Southard, 2020). They understand that healing often extends beyond medical interventions and encompasses the need for emotional support, hope, and connection. This empathetic approach enhances patient experiences and fosters a healing environment, where individuals can find comfort and solace in the presence of care that resonates with their own spiritual beliefs (Tavares et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study explored the profound lived experiences of millennial Filipino nurses who, despite global opportunities and systemic challenges, chose to remain practicing in the Philippines.

Their narratives challenged the dominant "brain drain" discourse, revealing that retention was an active and morally significant choice rooted in

relational ties, cultural belonging, and a search for meaning. Using van Manen's phenomenology, three paradoxes emerged: resilience as identity versus exploitation, familial joy as both a source of fulfillment and constraint, and sacrifice as a sacred duty versus a burden. The nurses expressed pride in their endurance amid systemic failures like high patient loads but also recognized how their dedication was exploited. Their deep sense of *pagmamahal sa pamilya* provided purpose but also imposed financial and emotional burdens. Spiritual convictions and civic duty transformed hardships into a sense of sacred mission, though often masking unmet material needs.

The study recommended that policies focus on fair wages, safe staffing, mental health support, and addressing gendered caregiving burdens to improve retention. Nursing education should promote leadership and systemic advocacy, fostering critical understanding of workplace challenges and ethical practice. Future research should investigate how retention motivations evolve over career stages and under different demographic factors, emphasizing longitudinal and intersectional approaches to inform sustainable interventions.

Overall, these nurses exemplify "lived throughness" a complex negotiation of professional calling, family obligations, and economic realities—highlighting the need for systemic reforms that honor their dignity. Their stories underscore that retention is not merely about individual resilience but requires addressing structural deficiencies and recognizing their agency as social actors. Their persistence is a powerful call to transform the healthcare system to better support their vital role and uphold their dignity and professional integrity.

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