



Being nurse–politicians in Thailand: A phenomenological research

Palatip Sarnkwawkum ¹, Areewan Oumtanee*

Faculty of Nursing, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Article Info

Article history:

Received 9 August 2017

Revised 3 October 2017

Accepted 12 December 2017

Available online 6 January 2018

Keywords:

nurse–politician,
phenomenological research,
politics,
professional nurses,
qualitative research

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of being a nurse–politician using Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology. Seven nurse–politicians willingly participated in this study. They used to be members of the House of Representatives in Thailand and had held at least one term in their political position. In-depth tape-recorded interviews, observation and field notes were used for data collection. The data were analyzed using content analysis and van Manen's method. The study findings fell into three major themes: 1. Becoming a politician. Nurses entered a political party for different reasons including: 1.1) born into a politician's family, 1.2) intention to stop corruption, 1.3) response to a family request, and 1.4) invitation from an idolized politician; 2. Applying nursing science to help people by: 2.1) being an honest politician, 2.2) applying holistic healthcare to help people, and 2.3) supporting health promotion rather than curative measures; and 3. Supporting the nursing profession. They supported the nursing profession by: 3.1) promoting the Professional Nursing Act, 3.2) fighting for adequate nurse staffing, and 3.3) assisting nurses who get into trouble from unfair management systems. The findings from this study provide an understanding of how nurse–politicians experience being both a nurse and a politician. It is recommended that nursing institutions and nursing organizations should encourage professional nurses to participate in political activities and to promote nurse citizens in their efforts to become nurse–politicians.

© 2017 Kasetsart University. Publishing services by Elsevier B.V.

Introduction

Historically, nurses have participated in the political environment, which has been demonstrated over the years by the professional nurse's role throughout the profession's development, the socio-political context changing, and healthcare system evolution (Milstead, 1999). Yet, it has not always been known or understood by the public. Not only does 'politic' refer to a process of influencing the

allocation of scarce resources but also reflects decision making for resource management (Leavitt & Mason, 1998). According to nursing history, nurses have promoted values of health, influenced decisions of health, and advocated for people's health (Warner, 2003). Florence Nightingale, was a nurse activist using persuasion in the community (Leavitt, 1998; Leavitt & Mason, 1998; Millio, 1970). Previously, the actions of professional nurses have been raised and they have gained more credence by joining political activities. The activities were supposed to have direct influence on the allocation of scarce resources in the area of public health and facilities. Furthermore, their activities are not only evidenced by joining an election process, but also in the setting of policies, such as public policy or nursing policy.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: p.sarnkwawkum@yahoo.com (P. Sarnkwawkum), areedy@yahoo.com (A. Oumtanee).

Peer review under responsibility of Kasetsart University.

¹ Co-first author

Likewise, [Betts \(2001\)](#) indicated that nurses should have greater participation in politics, especially in public policy making and the nursing policy making. [Des Jardin \(2001\)](#) also stated that policy making or policy advocacy came from political participation in several ways such as electoral participation, affiliation with a political organization, and being a politician. Currently, some nurses are participating, especially in the field of public policy making and nursing policy making, in their roles as nurse-politicians. Examples exist in the United States, Canada, and Australia of nurses who take part in politics as a politician; Mary Ann Dailey, a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, has used her nursing background in the legislation and development of health policy to solve environmental problems that have affected the health of the Pennsylvanian people ([Larson, 2014](#)). Bethany Lytle, a pediatric nurse, is a member of the Senate in Wisconsin, USA whose outstanding actions have improved not only the healthcare system but also promoted kindergarten education ([Lytle, 2011](#)). Cathy McLeod, a community nurse practitioner and nurse administrator, was elected to the position of Member of Parliament in Kamloops-Thompson-Cariboo, Canada for two periods and she has used nursing knowledge in health policy making to promote social welfare and support the handicap's quality of life ([Larson, 2014](#)). Gail Gago who was a senator and former member of the Australian House of Representatives, applied her psychiatric experiences to rearrange an appropriate Australian health policy ([Leavitt, 2007](#)).

In Thailand, according to a literature review, there are only nine professional nurses who are members of the House of Representatives ([Senate Secretariat, 2011](#)). Those nurse-politicians have tried to propose several nursing problems to the congress. Some nurses, as members of the Senate Committee on Health, proposed solutions to the important issue of rural nursing shortages to the government. They tried their best to maintain funding for nurses in workforce planning ([Senate Secretariat, 2011](#)). The report of the [Secretariat of the Senate \(2008\)](#) has shown that nurses who have entered the political process, have also served in solving health problems at the national level by the development of health service systems associated with pregnancy in adolescents, raising the universal health care policy, and solving urgent problems of public health and nursing profession. Having viewed the aforementioned examples, researchers have seen that this topic and what a nurse-politician is, should be explored. Since this topic has never had any study before and only nine nurses are currently active as members of the House of Representatives, phenomenological research methodology was appropriately applied to explore their experience of being a nurse-politician. In this study, the researchers used the Heideggerian phenomenology approach ([Streubert & Carpenter, 2011](#)) to study the experience and interpretation of being a nurse-politician.

Literature Review

The concept of political participation of professional nurses was used in this study to explain the lived experiences of being a nurse-politician. [Betts \(2001\)](#) indicated that nurses should have more participation in politics,

especially in public policy making and nursing policy making. Political participation of professional nurses can benefit nurses, the nursing profession, and the public. There are three roles in the political participation of nurses ([Betts, 2001](#)): 1) political participation as a nurse citizen. This involves participation in political activities or community activities such as voting for a candidate in an election; 2) political participation as a nurse activist. Such nurses play a greater role in political participation than as a nurse citizen. Nurses can participate in politics as nurse activists by joining a political organization or professional organization, making contact with the government to resolve health and nursing issues and lobbying those in authority and responsible for making decisions on issue of health care or the nursing profession by providing information to them; 3) political participation as a nurse-politician. Participation in a political position by being a nurse-politician is one way to use their knowledge and expertise in the field of healthcare to make a difference in healthcare and the nursing profession. Nurses can participate in politics as a nurse politician by getting elected and subsequently making a difference to healthcare and the nursing profession by getting involved in policy making or policy advocacy. Currently, some nurses are participating, especially in the field of public policy making and nursing policy making, in their roles as nurse-politicians. Those nurse-politicians have tried to propose several nursing problems to the congress. Some nurses, as members of the Senate Committee on Health, have proposed solutions to the important issue of rural nursing shortages to the government. They have tried their best to maintain funding for nurses in workforce planning ([Senate Secretariat, 2011](#)). The report of the [Secretariat of the Senate \(2008\)](#) showed that nurses who in the political process have worked to solve health problems at the national level by the development of health service systems, promoting health services for teen pregnancy, raising the universal health care policy, and solving urgent problems of public health and the nursing profession. The researcher has used this concept as a framework to analyze, interpret, and explain the lived experiences of being a politician and a professional nurse.

Methods

This qualitative research employed Heideggerian phenomenology to explore the participants' everyday worlds from their own perspectives and experiences ([Streubert & Carpenter, 2011](#)). This methodology was applied to conduct and interpret the experience of being a nurse-politician. The data were collected using tape-recorded in-depth interviews, observation, and field notes. Seven of the nine professional nurses who have had experience as a member of the House of Representatives for at least one term in their political position were willing to share their experiences. According to their personal backgrounds, six nurse-politicians were female, only one was male and their average age was 63.8 years. Five nurses had Bachelor's degrees, one nurse had graduated with a Master's degree and only one had a PhD. The four main, open-ended questions in the in-depth interviews were: "Could you

please tell me about how you became a politician?", "What did you do when you were a representative?", "How did your nursing background support you when you were working as a representative?"; and "Could you please give me an example of what you did for public health or the nursing profession?". Each interview lasted approximately 60 min. The researchers recorded their observations and took notes during the interviews. The tape recordings were transcribed verbatim. Data analysis used the per content analysis of van Manen's method which included the following: familiarization with the data, coding of the data, seeking themes, reviewing the themes, naming and defining themes, and producing the rapport of themes (Streubert & Carpenter, 2011). To ensure trustworthiness in this study, the researchers selected the participants by the application of the rigorous inclusion criteria as noted above. They attempted to establish good relationships between themselves and the participants as a means of building trust and rapport in the process of data collection. The researchers described the research findings based on the participant's information. This research was approved by the Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Research Subjects, Health Science Group, Chulalongkorn University (IRB Code: 126.1/2559).

Results

The study findings consisted of three major themes: 1) becoming a politician, 2) applying nursing science to help people, and 3) supporting the nursing profession.

1. Becoming a politician

Professional nurses joined a political party for different reasons, including being born into a politician's family, intending to combat corruption, responding to family pressures; or by invitation from politicians.

1.1) Born into a politician's family

Some nurses were born and grew up in families where a family member had been a politician, such as their father. As a family member, nurses were involved with the campaign, policy making, and any support to their family politician since they were young. Therefore, when they grew up, their family members pushed them into politics and into being a politician like their family member.

"My father forced me to be a politician. Since I was a child, I had to go to communities or campaigns with him. I saw many things he did. I think I became familiar to politics because of my father. After I graduated from nursing school, I helped him a lot in his campaign or policy making, especially with healthcare. So, he wanted me to get into politics like him and convinced me to be a politician." [ID7]

1.2) Intention to stop corruption

Some participants while working as a nurse had experienced bad events that made them feel strongly about the

unfairness or non-transparency of politicians' performance. Corruption in Thailand has been around for a long time, not only in the public sphere, but also as private-to-private corruption. For example, an ER nurse who had to clean and suture wounds for children who had been in accidents that had occurred in the same playground every day. She becomes curious as to what happened with those children. Eventually she found out that because of the poor playground materials provided by a local politician, accidents were happening involving the children. She thought that the best way to solve this problem was by becoming a good politician. She would then be able to help stop corruption in Thai society.

"Since I was an ER nurse, at lunch time every day I would have to dress and suture wounds for many elementary school students because of the collapse of seesaws, monkey bars, or slides in the playground. These accidents were created by the politician's project and they had gained benefit from their project by using poor quality contractors and equipment So, I thought if I were a politician, I would be able to get rid of the corruption" [ID2]

1.3) Response to a family request

Some nurses have been requested by their family to seek a political position. They stepped into politics for the needs of their family, even though they were not necessarily ready to do so. Their family thought that being a politician, the nurse could help them in the family businesses and the nurses did not want to disappoint their family. Thus, they decided to redirect their career from nursing to politics.

".... At that time, I didn't prepare myself for being a politician. I just wanted to help my family business. They [family] thought that if I were a politician, I would help them a lot in running their business. So, they requested me to be a candidate in the next campaign. I wanted to help my family and didn't want them to be disappointed in me. Well, I got into politics, even though I was not really ready". [ID3]

1.4) Invitation from an idolized politician

Some nurses involved themselves in politics when they were a nursing students by engaging in many student activities, especially as a student committee member. This helped them get more connections than other students. Later on, when they had passed their nursing exams and had more experience, their idolized politician came to persuade them to contribute as a politician.

"I was involved in politics since I was a nursing student when I was the nursing student President. At that time, Thailand was faced with a political crisis, Black May (2535 B.E.), I was the one of student representatives for protecting our democracy...So I got know many politicians. When I had graduated from nursing, they invited me to be a politician." [ID4]

2. Applying nursing science to help people

When nurses stepped into a political position, they often applied their knowledge and experience from being a nurse to work as an honest politician, using holistic care when visiting their people, and supporting health promotion rather than curative approaches.

2.1) Being an honest politician

As befits a professional nurses, they practiced integrity which led to their skills being applied more to the positive side. Avoiding corruption and improper actions, they could follow a mindset of good to push them forward in the footsteps of their role model, their professor. All of their beliefs support and lead them directly to be better politicians; which, from viewpoint of nurses, is based on sympathy and care.

"I was taught from our nursing profession to "Be honest". When I was an MP, I always used this motto regarding my political works.... And I always said to my people before I won an election that "I am not going to corrupt my country" So, it has made me an honest politician for my country, people and my party until now." [ID2]

2.2) Applying holistic care to help people

Nurses have always used their holistic care knowledge and expertise in their political work. It is a great combination between healthcare knowledge and politics that can make the country better. Holistic care expertise is especially useful when a nurse is involved in rural areas or communities. The nurses can help people in these communities not only regarding physical health but also their mind, mood, or anything surrounding. They are always concerned about the socioeconomic support, environment, and health status of the people. They can make community healthcare better because they always see the community in all the dimensions that could be the cause of problems by adopting a holistic view.

"When I was an MP and the Deputy Minister of Public Health, I used much of my nursing knowledge and skills in my job such as, holistic care, when I got into the community...I helped them not only health problems but also helped their mind, moods and anything around them. I had to think about their socioeconomic supports or how their environment affected them. ...Maybe, because I'm a nurse." [ID7]

2.3) Supporting health promotion rather than curative approaches

Nurses were representatives of healthcare professions when they were elected to be politicians. Their knowledge and expertise in healthcare always had an influence in determining or changing health policy. They can create the proper policy for health promotion in order for it to be effective and efficient regarding people's health. In

addition, they were given the authorization as health policy makers to support preventative health and keep people healthy rather than providing care when they get sick.

"I am a nurse. When I got into a political position, my party gave me the authority to make health policy.... I started the cervical cancer screening campaign in Thai females by using the VIA technique. (Visual Inspection with Acetic acid) It was effective and efficient as well as saving a lot of money By the way, I changed many health care policies. Starting the Village Health Volunteers for promoting the people's health by working with the healthcare providers, etc...." [ID5]

3. Supporting the nursing profession

Nurse-politicians not only work for country development but also contribute to the development of the nursing profession at the same time. Some nurses have helped to promote the Nursing and Midwifery Acts. Some nurses have supported the nursing profession by involvement in the issue of the nursing shortage. They also find themselves assisting fellow nurses who are faced with unfair practices. All of this comes from a sense of love for the nursing profession. The data analysis identified three sub-themes:

3.1) Promoting the Professional Nursing Act

When nurses were elected to be members of the House of Representatives, one of their contributions to the country's development and nursing profession development was pushing the Nursing and Midwifery Acts. They collaborated with Thailand Nursing and Midwifery Councils to advocate for Professional Nursing Acts. In doing so, they made the nursing profession independent and unique.

"I helped our profession a lot although I didn't work as a nurse in a clinical setting.... By my political position, as Deputy Minister of Public Health; I collaborated with Nursing Councils to advocate our Professional Nursing Acts in 2528 B.E. At that time, we didn't have our own Acts. We were all under the Physician Acts. Then, we were able to separate our profession from under the Physician Acts to having our own Professional Nursing Acts...." [ID7]

3.2) Fighting for adequate nursing staff

The shortage of nursing staff is a chronic global issue. The Thailand Nursing and Midwifery Council cannot solve this problem alone. It requires the cooperation of all sectors in society including the government sector, members of parliament including the senators, and especially the nurses who are members of the House of Representatives. They can play a big role as The President of the Committee or as members of committee to solve this issue.

"As a nurse-politician, I always helped our profession by being a politician. I worked together with the Nursing Council and the Deans of Nursing Schools around Thailand to solve the nurse shortage problem...I tried to convince other politicians to understand this problem and make

them appreciate the significance of this problem.... So, it was successful!!! They appointed a committee to solve this problem. Thus, we can have more Civil Servant positions and get more salaries and position allowances also." [ID5]

3.3) Assisting nurses who get into trouble due to the unfair management system

Politicians respond to the needs of the majority in working for country while the nursing half of the personality will be responsive to the individual patient's life. This is not to say that by becoming politicians, they empower themselves to support others. Both halves of the nurse–politician will be kept in balance to support and solve all unkind, unfair situations, including serious problems in the nursing work environment. Nurse–politicians can more effectively solve problems, bringing love and understanding with a clear concern for the nurse's point of view. They can better contribute to healthcare organizations, nurse's life quality issues, or unfair, troublesome situations by using their connections to influence, maintain, and promote the best solution.

"They (nurses) knew that "I'm a nurse". Well, when they have any trouble that cannot be solved by themselves, they always came to me. ...Almost all of the problems are about their working environment, such as inequality in their hospital, getting a civil service position, or moving their civil servant position to their hometown...I need to help them because we are all in the same profession. We are all nurses." [ID6]

Discussion

In this part, we discuss our main themes.

Professional nurses get into a political party for several reasons, including being born into a politician's family, intending to fix corruption, responding to family needs, and accepting invitations from politicians. Most nurse–politicians have been interested in politics since they were nursing students. After they graduated and became nurses, they faced many problems from unfair management in their workplace or the misdirection of their careers. This resulted in them looking for the opportunity to enter politics to eliminate corruption in their society as well as in Thailand. In addition, familiarity with politics because of their family's involvement in politics brought others into the political arena. The family has played a major role in making them interested in and familiar with politics, and also by supporting their decision to become a politician. King et al. (1995) stated that family support is the greatest support in the society by providing two things: 1) emotional support whereby family members have positive attitudes and behaviors to promote or encourage understanding and be attentive, providing good advice about the job, willingness to listen to discussion, and making recommendations in their job; and 2) instrumental support whereby family members have a positive attitude and behavior to help them whether it be regarding money, the workforce, materials, and necessary resources. This leads to a balance between life and work including working with

competence and bringing out their full abilities. The findings showed that nurse–politicians were cultivated by their families and were supported by both emotional and instrumental support from their families, therefore, embodying honesty, integrity, fairness, and the inspiration to be a politician. The study found that when professional nurses stepped into politics, they applied nursing knowledge to their political work. To be a good politician, some nurses strongly adhered to the honesty that had been cultivated in them by the nursing profession. Some of them used their nursing and health care knowledge to make a difference. These are some their strategies for being a good politician by having all the qualifications of a good Thai politician (Charoenwongsak, 1996). The qualifications of a good Thai politician include having high personal qualities, good qualifications that will be useful to the nation, unselfishness, broadness of vision, reacting calmly when faced with a critical situation, having a good way of life from the past until the present, and having transparency both in their working and personal life. In addition, nurse–politicians also have the qualification of being a good politician as related by Warner (2003) that the politician should have knowledge and be thoroughly informed about the constituency that they are going to represent. They must have the ability to foretell things that are going to happen both in the near future and in the longer term, with high integrity and additional skills to achieve results and find better ways of improving the lives of the people they represent. Moreover, good politicians should have a well-disciplined personality and a sense of selflessness to make other peoples' lives better. This study found that nurse–politicians always used their holistic care approach in their political work when they were in rural areas or communities (Bunton & Macdonald, 2002). They can help people in communities not only with health-related issues but also by improving the part of minds, mood or anything surrounding their constituents. They are always concerned about socioeconomic matters, support, the environment, and the health status of the people. They can make community healthcare better because they look at things around them in all dimensions to identify the causes of problems by adopting a holistic view. In addition, they have the authority as health policy makers to support preventative health rather than providing care when people get sick because health promotion is focused on preventative healthcare rather than the medical model of curative care (American Holistic Nurses Association, 2007). Nurse–politicians not only work for the development of the country but also contribute to the development of the nursing profession. Some nurses have helped to promote the Nursing and Midwifery Acts and are also involved in the issue of nursing shortages. Since nurses have been elected to the House of Representatives, one of their missions has been to contribute to the country's development as well as the nursing profession's development, pushing the implementation of the Nursing and Midwifery Acts. The Thai Nursing and Midwifery Acts that became law in both 2528 B.E. and 2540 B.E. resulted from the cooperation of Thai nursing and midwifery Council and nurse–politicians who were in the House of the Representatives (Suwannachart et al., 2008). At that time, there were three political

parties who led the action and proposed agendas for the House of Representatives meeting. In the meeting, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Health was a member of committee as well as being a nurse. She was a very important person in pushing the Nursing Profession Acts, coordinating between Nursing and Midwifery Councils and the Parliament, and clarifying the reason for and promoting the nursing profession Acts. Moreover, she had other nurse-politicians to support in pushing through the Nursing Profession Acts and solving the shortage of nursing staff. Such a big issue cannot be solved by the Nursing Council alone; it requires the cooperation of all sectors in society including the government sector, MPs through senators, and especially the nurses being members of the House of Representatives. They can play a major role as The President of the Committee or as members of committee to solve this issue. Moreover, the shortage of nursing staff has been and still is a global issue. They will also play a major role in solving this issue (Des Jardin, 2001) including providing help to assist nurses who get into trouble as a result of unfair management from nursing or healthcare organizations.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Nurse-politicians become involved in politics for many reasons and are doing many kinds of jobs for the development of the country. However, they help the nursing profession through their political position. They have promoted the Nursing Profession Acts, solved the nurse shortage problem, and helped many nurses when faced with problems that the individual has been unable to solve. Moreover, nurse-politicians are outstanding politicians because they are honest, and are concerned with the things around them and are a force for change in healthcare. Thus, it is recommended that nursing institutions and nursing organizations should encourage professional nurses to participate in political activities and to promote nurse citizens in their efforts to become nurse-politicians.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the 90th Anniversary of Chulalongkorn University, Rachadapisek Sompote Fund.

References

- American Holistic Nurses Association. (2007). *Holistic nursing: Scope and standards of practice* (pp. 192–215). SilverSpring, MD: Nursesbook.org.
- Betts, V. T. (2001). Nurses and political action. In K. K. Chitty (Ed.), *Professional nursing: Concepts & challenges* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders.
- Bunton, R., & Macdonald, G. (2002). *Health promotion: Disciplines, diversity, and developments* (pp. 132–156). London, UK: Routledge.
- Charoenwongsak, K. (1996). *Thai politics* (pp. 39–45). Bangkok: Thailand: Success Media. [in Thai]
- Des Jardin, K. E. (2001). Political involvement in nursing education and empowerment. *The Association of Perioperative Registered Nurses*, 74(4), 468–482.
- King, L. A., et al. (1995). Family support inventory for worker: A new measure of perceived social support from family members. *Journal of Organization Behavior*, 16(3), 235–258.
- Larson, J. (2014). *Nurse legislators: Representing health care in state government*. Retrieved from <http://www.americannobile.com/nursezone/nursing-news/Nurse-Legislators-Representing-Health-Care-in-State-Government>.
- Leavitt, J. K. (1998). Rising to the top: An interview with Sheila Burke. In D. J. Mason, & J. K. Leavitt (Eds.), *Policy and politics in nursing and healthcare* (4th ed., pp. 458–461). Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders.
- Leavitt, J. K. (2007). The political activism of nursing – in organizations and the government. In K. K. Chitty, & B. P. Black (Eds.), *Professional nursing: Concepts & challenges* (pp. 393–420). Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders.
- Leavitt, J. K., & Mason, D. J. (1998). Policy and politics: A framework for action. In D. Mason, & J. K. Leavitt (Eds.), *Policy and politics in nursing and health care* (4th ed.). Philadelphia, PA: W. B. Saunders.
- Lytle, B. (2011). Politics: A natural next step for nurses. *American Journal of Nursing*, 5(111), 19–20.
- Millio, N. (1970). 9226 Kercheval: The storefront that did not burn (pp. 14–17). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Milstead, J. A. (1999). *Health policy & politics: A nurse's guide* (pp. 235–246). Gaithersberg, MA: Aspen.
- Senate Secretariat. (2008). *The report of universal coverage and urgent public health problem* (pp. 30–47). Bangkok, Thailand: Author.
- Senate Secretariat. (2011). *The report of nursing staff shortage* (pp. 15–30). Bangkok, Thailand: Author.
- Streubert, H. J., & Carpenter, D. R. (2011). *Qualitative research in nursing advance the humanistic imperative* (5th ed., pp. 251–272). New York, NY: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Suwannachart, et al. (2008). *Issues and Trends in 21st century nursing administration Unit 1-4* (pp. 18–28). Nonthaburi, Thailand: Sukhothai Thammathirat Open University Press. [in Thai]
- Warner, J. R. (2003). A phenomenological approach to political competence: Stories of nurse activists. *Policy, Politics, & Nursing Practice*, 4(2), 135–143.