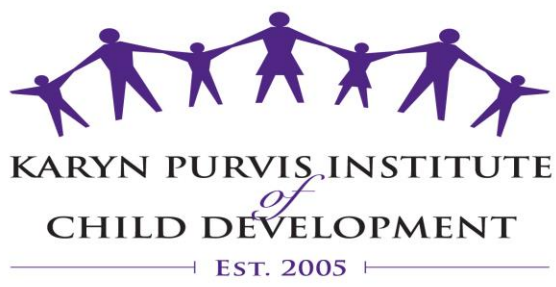




Motivations in Choosing Helping Professions: A Qualitative Study

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Introduction

Background

- Aspiring professionals often pursue careers in helping professions as a way to achieve personal and long-term aspirations. These goals typically reflect the kind of person they want to become, the life they envision, and the impact they hope to make on others (Gavarkovs et al., 2023). Research shows that motivations for entering helping professions are often personal in nature, shaped by values, meaningful relationships, and life experience, especially childhood adversities (Bryce et al., 2021).
- Prior research highlights the importance of purpose-driven work in career selection. Individuals are more likely to pursue helping professions when they perceive the work as meaningful and socially impactful (Allan, Douglass, Duffy, & McCarty, 2016). This sense of purpose not only influences initial career choice but also contributes to long-term professional engagement and satisfaction. As such, understanding these motivational factors is essential for developing support systems that attract and retain passionate, mission-aligned professionals in these critical fields.
- Understanding what drives individuals to pursue careers in helping professions is essential for improving workforce recruitment, retention, and training—particularly in high-demand sectors like child welfare, education, and mental health. Despite growing interest in this field, research exploring the motivations behind these career choices remains limited.

The Aim of the Study

Explore individuals’ motivations for entering helping professions.

Methods

Participants

- 398 helping professionals (M = 43.08 years, range = 22–70), with the majority identifying as female (87%) and white (80%).
- Participants worked in diverse fields: foster care/adoption (37%), clinical/counseling services (29%), education (16%), and juvenile justice (9%).



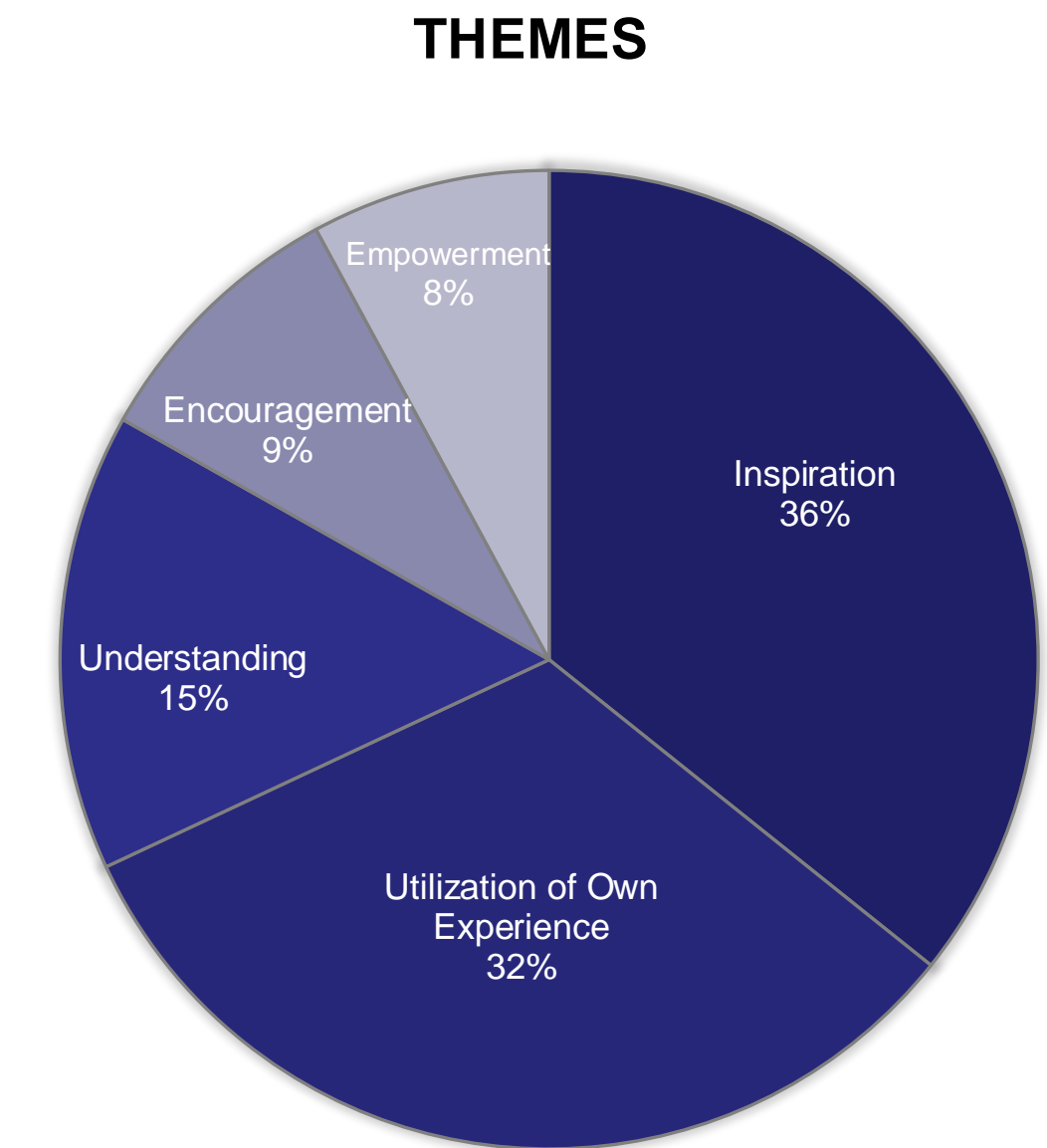
Procedure & Data Analysis

- Data were collected via Qualtrics surveys featuring open-ended questions, including: **Why did you choose to be in a helping profession?**
- Microsoft Excel was utilized to organize and analyze the data.
- Responses were analyzed using thematic analysis: Coding for emerging words/phrases; Developing a codebook; Identifying initial themes; Grouping themes into categories; Calculating frequency of responses.

Results

Thematic analysis revealed five key motivational themes:

- Inspiration** (35.74%) – Desire to make a difference, passion for service, personal satisfaction, faith.
- Utilization of Personal Experience** (32.20%) – Applying life experiences, empathy, a helping mindset
- Understanding** (15.11%) – Awareness of others’ needs, family influences, and human development
- Encouragement** (8.93%) – Promoting growth, hope, prevention, and connection
- Empowerment** (7.90%) – Advocating for others, building trust, amplifying voices



Discussion

- This study explores how individuals perceive meaning and alignment in their career choice. The two most prominent themes, **Inspiration** and **Utilization of Personal Experience**, suggest that helping professionals are often driven by an intrinsic desire to make a meaningful impact, as well as by experiences that foster empathy and a strong sense of purpose. Many participants expressed a desire to give back, support others, or become the kind of supportive figure they once needed themselves.
- Other themes, such as **Understanding**, **Encouragement**, and **Empowerment**, reflect broader values associated with helping work—like recognizing the importance of relationships, advocacy, and human growth. These findings reinforce the idea that motivations go beyond financial or practical considerations, centering instead on meaning, alignment, and a sense of calling.

Limitations and Future Research

- This study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce response bias and affect the accuracy of participants’ reflections on their motivations. The sample was predominantly White and female, which may limit generalizability.
- Future research should explore career motivations across diverse cultural and demographic groups to better understand the variety of factors that influence entry into helping professions.

Illustrative Quotes

“An adult made a difference in my life, and I want to do the same for others!”

“Relationships have always been a primary focus in my life, and a helping profession allows and invites me into some of the most vulnerable areas of peoples lives. I wanted to touch and impact lives in a way that truly mattered, be it via a one time encounter or over a lifetime of working together.”

“People matter more than things. Wanting to do work that felt meaningful to me. Wanting to be the person I needed as a child.”

Theme	Code
Encourage	Hope
	Recovery/healing
	Prevention/intervention
	Connections
Empower	Growth
	Children, adolescents, families
Utilizing	Advocacy
	Build trust
Motivated by	Own traumas
	Empathy
Understanding	Helping mindset
	Passion
	Personal satisfaction/rewards
	Making a difference/meaning
	Faith
	Family influence
	Impact of traumas

References

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Bryce, I., Pye, D., Beccaria, G., McIveen, P., & Du Preez, J. (2023). A systematic literature review of the career choice of helping professionals who have experienced cumulative harm as a result of adverse childhood experiences. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 24(1), 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380211016016>