

Surviving Typhoon Yolanda (Haijan): Experiences of Older Adults in a Rural Area in the Philippines

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Abstract: This study explored the lived experiences of the older adults affected by the Typhoon Yolanda(Haijan). Using Husserl's Phenomenological design, this study interviewed nine informants through a Focus Group interview to generate their experiences during the prior to, during and after the typhoon. Data gathering and analysis were done using Collaizi's method which produced descriptions of the informants' experiences. The findings generated six emergent themes describing the lives experiences as: living and reliving experiences of fear, enhanced physical burden, loss and helplessness, selflessness, social bond and rebuilding lives. The themes generated described the experiences of older adults from a negative translated into positive experiences. The findings present the uniqueness of the lived experiences of older adults during a disaster.

Keywords: lived experiences, older adults, Typhoon Haijan (Yolanda), phenomenology, Collaizi's method

Introduction

Super typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda), badly hit the northern part of Cebu, Philippines. Haiyan left its victims with a unique experience of how a disaster affects their lives. This event marked a significant impact on the lives of the survivors from the children to the older population. According to Lazarus, Jimerson & Brock (2002) as cited by Young, Cain, Fesmire, Williams & Worthy (2006), natural disasters bring about unique challenges to families or individuals which involves adjustment to changes in settlement, living conditions and most of all the psychological reactions and trauma from the unusual experiences. Individuals react differently to stress from natural disaster according to some factors such as age, gender and race. The variability of the reactions presents the idea that across ages, older adults perceived more or less the same experience differently compared to other population (Young, Cain, Fesmire, Williams, & Worthy, 2006). In the general population, healthy elders are at risk to reduction of physical and cognitive ability required for safe, independent, and efficient care of themselves in a disaster. Even in their daily activities, elderly require assistance and assistive devices to promote mobility, more so in cases of disasters (Pekovic, Seff, & Rothman, 2007; Albert, 2004). It is therefore interesting to listen to the

elderly experiences in disaster on the context of their own environment and personal milieu.

Most studies focused on the emotional, social and psychological effects of disasters in older adults (Burnett, Dryer, & Pickins, 2007; Ford, et al., 2006; Anetzberger, 2002). However, defining the experiences of survivors of Typhoon Haiyan in the eyes of the older adults is a very significant documentation of how they outlived the gravity of such a disaster. The devastating impact that natural disasters have on cities, people and communities is visually apparent, but the disproportionate effects of these disasters on the elderly is not as visible (Harvey, 2013). Considerable research has documented increased risk for a variety of post-disaster problems in the elderly people. In a disaster situation, the interaction of personal and social vulnerability will influence the ability of older adults to prepare, respond to and recover from such an event. Through this study, gaps in the needs and interventions which nurses can provide for elderly affected by natural calamities will be identified. This can also serve as basis for drafting policies for the welfare of elderly specifically during calamities. It is therefore the intention of this research undertaking to explore the experiences of the survivors of Typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) among residents of north Cebu,

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Philippines across the graduated lens of reality among older adults.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a rural area or barangay in the northern part of Cebu. The town has been hardly hit by the Typhoon Haijan which hit Visayas on November 8, 2013. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology was used in the study. It is used to reach true meanings through engaging in-depth into reality. It emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interprets of the world. That is, the researchers want to understand how a world appears to others (Trochim, 2008). Using phenomenology provides a clear description of how older adults experienced the typhoon and understand the meaning of these experiences.

Purposive sampling was utilized in the selection of the informants of the study. There were nine (9) older adults, aged 60 years and above who are residents of the Barangay Caputatan Norte, Medellin, Cebu who experienced Typhoon Haijan when it hit in Northern Cebu. The researchers conducted a focus-group discussion as a means of data collection utilizing guide questions formulated by the researchers. This is to capture the rich in-depth description of the experiences of the older adults. Focus group discussion was initiated using unstructured open-ended questions. Krueger's Focus Group Discussion (Krueger, 2002) protocol was used in this study. Bradbury-Jones, Sambrook & Irvine (2009) state that focus groups are congruent with phenomenological research and extend this argument further by proposing that group interviews in phenomenology are actually beneficial because they stimulate discussion and open up new perspectives. The use of Focus Group in phenomenology enhances data to be gathered since it allows multiple voices to be heard at one sitting, drawing a larger sample into a smaller number of data collection events (Palmer, Larkin, De Visser, & Fadden, 2010).

In this study, the researchers ensured that the informants were able to comprehensively understand the study with all due consideration of their level of understanding. Before signing the consent, every informant was provided explanation about the process of focus-group discussion, stress debriefing was conducted after the FGD and was assured that anonymity was preserved. Consent for audio recording was asked from the informants. Audio recorded information and transcriptions were destroyed after the completion of the study.

Prior to the data gathering stage, bracketing was used to prevent bias and to stop the researcher's assumptions and beliefs from influencing the research process. The researchers used Colaizzi's

approach to phenomenological analysis. Colaizzi's seven steps on the method of data analysis was utilized in the study (Shosha, 2012). The process of participant validation was utilized in this study. Colaizzi's method of data analysis is the only method that requires validation of results by returning to the participants. All participants were asked to validate their experiences by sharing to the participants the findings of the study.

Results and Discussions

Older adults are disproportionately affected by disaster (Johnson, Ling, & McBee, 2015). Special challenges overtake them during disasters, but it must also be recognized that they share common experiences with others. They are affected by the overall intensity and type of catastrophe, the reaction of their community, and the phases that occur during and after the onset (Oriol, 1999). Their ability to prepare for, respond to, and recover from a disaster depends on a variety of factors that often are beyond their immediate control (Fernandez, Byard, Lin, Benson, and Barbera, 2002). Their experiences on disaster seem similar with other age groups; however, there are certain facets of the experience that is quite unique to them. The proponents of the study identified themes to provide us a glimpse of their experience at the height of the Typhoon Haijan.

Emergent Theme 1: Living and Re-living the Fear that Was

This theme was developed based on the emergence of the cluster themes, *Controlled by Fear that is Multidimensional and Multifaceted and Comparing Past Experiences to Characterize the Experience of Fear*. As the interview progresses, the older adults tend to dwell on the experience of the typhoon and continuously reminisce the difficulty they experienced. The research on reminiscing demonstrates that age may not be the main factor accounting for the amount of time a person spends reminiscing. Rather life situation or circumstances may be more significant, particularly during periods of stress or transition. Studies suggest that under such circumstances, the individual is forced to shift from the active role of mastering his environment to a more passive orientation that values the world of inner experience. Thus, reminiscence becomes a mechanism for coping with change (FamilyConsumer, 2013).

A common description of the informants of what they felt during the before and during the typhoon was the feeling of fear. However, it is interesting to note that the fear that they felt differs as to why they are afraid of and how fear affects them. Their fear assumed different faces and dimensions.

The impact of a natural disaster or traumatic event goes far beyond physical damage. The emotional toll can result in a wide range of intense, confusing, and sometimes frightening emotions (Smith & Seagal, 2015). Why they are afraid generated different concerns informants. Informants related the fear due to the severity of the typhoon and its consequences to the people. Another face of fear manifested because of absence of mature family members who can help protect younger family members. The vulnerability of the informants is aggravated by threats to one's safety and security and of their loved ones. One of the informants recounted that the fear brought other concerns with it such as fear for their health which caused them to be at great danger and physical immobility.

Fear is not only due to the peril they are facing but fear of death as well. Fear of death among older adults is not well understood. Although existing research is somewhat inconsistent, most evidence leads to the conclusion that fear of death tends to be greater among younger age groups and declines with increasing age (Cicirelli, 2001). However, at the height of the catastrophe, death was among the possibilities they considered.

In the statement of one of the informants it can be clearly observed that elderly tend to relive past memories and compare it with their current experience. Sharing memories helps older adults relive past events in their lives. By sharing memories, older adults can explore their thoughts and feelings about the past. They can put their past experiences in perspective with what is happening to them in the present or what is expected to happen in the future (Healthwise, 2011). They knew what to do after the typhoon due to their previous experience and out of their desire to survive.

Emergent Theme 2: Enhanced Physical Burden

Catastrophes place older adults at risk to physical burden. The reasons why some of them are particularly vulnerable during and after disasters include their impaired physical mobility diminished sensory awareness, chronic health conditions, and social and economic limitations that prevent adequate preparation and hinder adaptability during disasters (Fernandez, Bryard, Lin, Benson, & Barbera, 2002). An informant narrated the difficulty they went through due to the strong winds coupled by their physical deficiencies. Limited mobility can create severe problems for older people in crises. Housebound older people are left behind or are unable to gain access to essential services. The experience of the typhoon also added more challenge to their already frail bodies. And, the worst part is they cannot provide for their physical needs due to

the situation the calamity took them in.

Emergent Theme 3: Lost and Helpless

The concern and sadness of losing the properties they have invested for many years due to the calamity is one significant experience that was shared. The realization of the loss after the typhoon made them unable to think and act, they were replaced with sadness. Sadness for the loss.

Emergent Theme 4: Selflessness

Victims of calamities often react with a sense of helplessness. Responses of those not directly harmed in a disaster is often an extreme from either selflessness or depravity (Samarasinghe, 2005). In the context of this study, it is noted from the testimonies of informants that they themselves showed selflessness towards their co-victims as they fought to live during the typhoon.

Older people are often left to care for younger children or other dependents in the absence of middle-generation adults (HelpAge International, 2000). However, older persons in this study showed the strength and dependability to whom younger generations and co-older adults took refuge.

As a result of emergencies, older people have increased responsibilities for supporting their families, mobilizing resources and caring for children, orphans and other dependents. Earlier emergency experiences, coping strategies, traditional skills and local environmental knowledge are important in mitigating the impact of emergencies. Older people's responsibilities and knowledge base should be recognized and built on (HelpAge International, 2000). As one informant mentioned, that they might have scarcity of resources but their desire to help others made them look for other means to help others.

Emergent Theme 5: Social Bond

During the typhoon, families evacuated to other houses for safety. There were families who housed many of their neighbors but during the height of the typhoon, the house where they stayed was also destroyed. But despite all these, families, neighbors and friends stayed together and made it through the typhoon alive without separating themselves from each other.

The disaster may be catastrophic in scope (having an impact on large numbers of persons or entire communities), tending to unite those affected by them into common efforts not only at time of rescue or relief but during revival (Oriol, 1999). Being

together as a family, as a group brings more meaning to their survival from the calamity. There is a connection and an unseen force that bind them together to strive to survive as one.

Emergent Theme 6: Rebuilding lives

At the time of disaster and soon after, people who have experienced the unexpected and traumatic work together to save lives and property (Oriol, 1999). Shortly after the disaster, residents begin returning to their communities. Citizens enter neighborhoods, assessing the damages sustained by their neighbors, wondering what they will find at their own homes. At this point, the task of picking up the pieces of their lives begins. In this study, the informants started standing up again after the disaster. They resolved to rebuild their lives and broken spirits. This sense of hope started with their sense of gratitude for being alive despite the tragedy that was. The feeling of gratitude despite the disastrous experience. The positive insight derived from a negative experience. Recognizing and accepting their current reality helped them went through the process of moving forward and put scraps back into its bigger shapes.

Exhaustive Description of the Lived Experiences of Older Adults During Typhoon Haijan (Yolanda)

Older adults who survived through a disaster particularly during Typhoon Haijan (Yolanda) experienced fear, difficulty, lost and helplessness during and after the disaster however, these were also compensated with a sense of selflessness, strengthening social bond and rebuilding their lives. These experiences dominated in the minds and hearts of the older adults which showed their compassion towards others as well. Moreover, the wisdom of experience among older adults also made them relive their past experiences of typhoons giving them a sense of comparison. The physical difficulties that the older adults experienced were centered mostly on the limitations of their environmental conditions due to loss of homes and properties.

Emanating from this sense of selflessness, older adults also experienced a sense of camaraderie and group survival. The disaster created a certain sense of social bond that despite the difficulties they experienced, they had resolved to themselves that they should be together in surviving the disaster. The bond made them help each other and recognize the needs of others, which enabled them to finds ways for survival unique to their respective experiences. In the process of rebuilding their emotional, spiritual and physical lives, the same cohesive bond made them help each other. Finally, they have the sense of grounding themselves to reality and accepting their fate with open hearts which enabled them to move on and continue to live their lives if not like before,

much better than before because of their sense of gratitude for being alive and for others who helped them. They are still uncertain of their future although they are prepared for the worst in their lives.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of older adults during a disaster particularly Typhoon Haijan (Yolanda). The findings of the study confirmed that the lived experiences of older adults was indeed a life changing process ranging from the undesirable to life giving experiences. It was shown in the experiences of older adults that they are vulnerable to disaster but their sense of concern for others made them stronger and inspiring in the lives of people whom they have helped. The process of rebuilding their lives encompassed the positive responses and the uncertainty they felt for the future.

New knowledge generated in this study was that older adults during hardships tend to develop a strong sense of selflessness and responsibility for a group or a family who they are with. In times of disaster, they create a unifying bond with others reducing the sense of isolation during and after a disaster. The findings of the study provided an insight that older adults do not capitalize on their physical limitations due to old age but they became sources of knowledge, strength and inspiration to others as well.

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