

Beyond the fragments: The lived experiences of armed conflict evacuees

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Abstract: This study investigated the lived experiences of Marawi evacuees who left Marawi due to the conflict. Interpretive phenomenology, specifically Hans-George Gadamer's hermeneutic circle was utilized. Eight informants were selected and interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Applying van Manen's four lived worlds, five themes emerged, namely: (1) "Shattered Reality" with the subthemes: (a) This Can't Be Happening and (b) A Light Amidst the Smoke of Dread, (2) "The Missing Pieces" with the subthemes: (a) Barren Hands Reap Futile Harvests, (b) Sifting Through the War-Torn Rubble and (c) There's No Place Like Home, (3) "Facets of Displacement", with the subthemes: (a) The Comfort of Compassion, and (b) The Sting of Stereotypes, (4) "Piecing Together a New Beginning" with the subthemes: (a) Tempered Resolve and (b) Sowing the Seeds of Tomorrow, and lastly, (5) Shatterproof Faith. Findings revealed that even in the face of adversity, the resolve to bounce back, tempered by their faith and support from others, enabled the informants to find meaning beyond the fragments left behind by the crisis and work towards a better future.

Keywords: Marawi crisis, internally displaced persons, evacuees, armed conflict, disaster, phenomenology, Gadamer, hermeneutics, van Manen.

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent Marawi crisis is considered to be the bloodiest armed conflict to occur in the Philippines since World War II [1]. As a testament to its magnitude as an armed conflict, the Marawi crisis is one of few moments in Philippine history wherein martial law was implemented.

War is a multifaceted experience as survivors may face a number of possible traumatic events [2], often leading to long-term physical and psychological harm, most commonly "depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic problems" [3]. In contrast, it has also been shown to unearth the resilience of survivors. It is through this resilience that "future-oriented coping mechanisms" are able to emerge [4].

As of yet, no interpretive phenomenological studies have been conducted on survivors of man-made conflicts in the Philippines. In contrast, literature on victims of natural disasters in the Philippines is numerous. The Marawi evacuees present a unique opportunity to study how they perceive their experiences as not only war survivors but also as evacuees, and how their experiences may compare with those of natural disasters victims.

The Marawi evacuees are also considered as internally displaced persons (IDP) or individuals or groups who were forced to leave their homes and migrate within the borders of their country, due to naturally-made disasters such as typhoons or man-made disasters such as armed conflicts [5]. As of May 2015, "it was estimated that at least 119,000 people remained displaced in the Philippines due to conflict and violence" and "close to 220,000 people have been displaced in Mindanao due to conflict and violence since January 2015" [6]. Due to the Marawi crisis alone, 59,495 families remain displaced as of March 2018 [7]. Civilians who undergo forced displacement persist as one of the most critical humanitarian issues in developing countries as they experience the loss of "social, legal and economic ties" and thus endure physical and psychological adversities [8].

II. THE STUDY

A. Aim

The study explored the lived experiences of Marawi evacuees.

B. Design

The researchers utilized an interpretive phenomenologic design, specifically Gadamer's hermeneutic circle along with van Manen's philosophy of the four lived worlds in the analysis of the gathered data.

C. Settings and Informants

The researchers utilized snowball and maximum variation sampling method in obtaining eight (8) informants to interview for this study, all residing in Cebu.

Inclusion criteria include: (1) Marawi evacuee that left Marawi due to the crisis between March 23, 2017 and October 23, 2017 (2) Is originally a resident from Marawi (3) aging 18 years old and above (4) can speak and understand Tagalog, Cebuano or English (5) must not be undergoing depression. Exclusion criteria includes evacuees (1) that have a moderate to high post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms with a cut-off score of 30 and above in the PTSD Checklist - Specific (PCL-S) or (2) that have mild to severe major depression with a cut-off score of 10 and above in the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).

D. Data Collection

This study has been approved by the Velez College Ethics Review Committee. Before data collection, a self-awareness activity with the school's guidance counselor was conducted, followed by a mock interview with a Cebu resident who was previously a Marawi resident but was not present in Marawi during the crisis.

After the informants gave their permission to participate in the study, they were given the PTSD and depression screening tools. After determining whether they had passed the screening, the researchers gave a thorough explanation of the consent form. After verifying the informant's understanding and voluntary participation of the study, the interview was then commenced using the aid of a semi-structured interview guide with the grand tour question, "How have you lived through these past few months since leaving Marawi due to the crisis?"

During the interview, one of the researchers was the primary interviewer while the other acted as the secondary interviewer. Another researcher set up the recording equipment, and the other took notes on the nonverbal cues using a jot down notebook. Lastly, the researchers thanked the informants with a token.

E. Ethical Considerations

A screening process was conducted before the interview. An informed consent was also provided, detailing how privacy and confidentiality would be maintained in all handling of any information and data regarding informants. Additionally, the informant's rights, the benefits and risks of the study were explained in the consent form.

F. Rigor of the Study

To ensure credibility, dependability, authenticity, transferability and confirmability, the researchers utilized audio recordings, method triangulation, iterative questioning, peer scrutiny, verification through related literature and studies.

G. Data Analysis

Analysis was grounded on van Manen's four lifeworld existentials [9]: (1) lived body (corporeality), (2) lived human relations (relationality), (3) lived space (spatiality), (4) lived time (temporality). This allowed immersion into the world of lived experience, gaining insight into the essence of the daily lives of human beings regardless of the social, cultural and historical context. Moreover, phenomenological research utilizes these existential as the basis for questioning, reflecting and writing.

III. RESULTS

Theme 1: "Shattered Reality"

The Marawi crisis came with a bang that came unexpectedly. Under its magnitude, any semblance of the informants' sense of home crumbled. In the subtheme, (a) "This Can't Be Happening", the informants did not expect that the conflict would go on for how many days. As Edris verbalized, "I was really shocked that I did not believe that it would be like

that. At first, I thought to myself at first that in three days, in four days that they (the gunfire) would just disappear from our place... We thought it (the conflict) would just disappear." In the subtheme, (b) "A Light Amidst the Smoke of Dread", the fear for safety eventually pushed the informants to evacuate with their family to safety. As Edris stated, "Once the airstrike arrived, that was it, it was like unbearable to the ears, that's why we left there and at first, we did not plan on leaving."

Theme 2: "The Missing Pieces"

In their new location, the informants had to acquaint themselves with a new sense of reality. This new reality lacked certain components that were integral to their lives. In the subtheme, (a) "Barren Hands Reap Futile Harvests", work was perceived by the informants as essential to their life as without it, basic needs were difficult to meet. As Abdul verbalized, "Nothing, we just stare blankly. There's no more work for you, you keep, we keep staring blankly, listening to the news if it was already finished, that is why we listen if the war was already finished." In the subtheme (b), "Sifting Through the War-Torn Rubble", the informants had to learn to live without the comfort of their home. As Aquila verbalized, "It's hard to start over again because there's nothing left at all. We lost and can't go back to our house, it's gone, everything is destroyed including our things, it's gone and some of our things were stolen." In the subtheme, (c) "There's No Place Like Home", even after they had regained some sense of stability post-evacuation, the informants still desired to return to their homes in Marawi. As Edris stated, "Once Marawi is okay, we will really return to Marawi because it is nice there since that is where you grew up. Of course, the place where you grew up, that is where you will return to."

Theme 3: "Facets of Displacement"

In getting settled in their new residence, the informants' experiences as evacuees, like faceted glass, was not one-sided, instead comprising both the good and bad. In the subtheme, (a) "The Comfort of Compassion", the positive side of their experience included receiving support from their family, community and organization. As Gabriel verbalized, "It was okay. I will also accept it because where would you get (relief goods) otherwise, it's already been provided. We don't have anything to eat. So if someone will offer, of course we will accept it." Conversely, in the subtheme, (b) "The Sting of Stereotypes", informants encountered prejudice in their new residence. In response to the prejudice, Fatima stated, "It's like, it's like you feel disappointed, 'What is going on with them? They don't even know us.'"

Theme 4: "Piecing Together a New Beginning"

After reflecting on the missing fragments of their lives post-evacuation, the informants were determined to start rebuilding their lives, one piece at a time. In the subtheme, (a) "Tempered Resolve", their determination to rise above adversity, like metal that has undergone tempering, slowly emerged despite the immense stress of the crisis. As Fatima stated, "I don't dramatize it that much anymore because what can you do, it already happened. It's better, instead of dramatizing, to continue your life instead of feeling down so that you will fix yourself instead of dramatizing too much, staring, you won't be able to move on otherwise." In the subtheme, (b) "Sowing the Seeds of Tomorrow", in their pursuit of reestablishing a sense of normalcy, the informants endeavored to take measures in finding a means of living. As Aquila stated, "Because my husband is here. And of course, I can look for a means of living here because my family there (in Marawi) they also have their own family. My sibling had a spouse and a child. I, of course, I will look for (work), because it's difficult to rely on others."

Theme 5: "Shatterproof Faith"

The informants' outlook on the entirety of the crisis was mainly grounded on their devotion to God. Even under the tremendous pressure of the crisis, their faith shone through, firm and unyielding. As Jojo verbalized, "No I don't (regret what happened in Marawi) because I believe that what happened was God's will... It wouldn't have happened if it had not been what God had wanted."

IV. DISCUSSION

Shattered Reality. Man-made conflicts such as armed conflicts are known to cause psychological trauma [10]. The prevalence of conflicts between clans, or "rido" [11] in Maranao culture factored into the informants' sense of disbelief. Despite the difficulty associated with leaving one's home, loved ones can persuade each other to evacuate by communicating concern for one another [12].

The Missing Pieces. One common cause of conflict has been the loss of livelihood [13]. Work and work ethic are viewed as integral in the practice of Islam as they are through which a person is able to “seek God’s bounty” [14]. The Islamic home is more than its physical form; it is also a melting pot of “the belief system, teachings and values of Islam” and “the prerequisites and influences of indigenous cultures, climates, topographies, the availability and quality of building materials, talents, technologies and economies” [15].

Facets of Displacement. During the course of rehabilitation, IDPs are usually able to provide for their own needs, but the provision of basic support to them has also been observed to be of great benefit [5]. Additionally, by preserving interpersonal relations with other people, a “resilient personality” is able to emerge [4]. Conversely, it was found that host communities viewed IDPs with fear and persecuted them on account of being displaced [16].

Piecing Together a New Beginning. Resilience is defined as the ability to “maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning” despite exposure to a highly disruptive event (Bonanno, 2004). Individuals recovering from mental sequelae of war took note of their “future-oriented coping” and resilient personality [4]. In Islam, work is considered an integral religious obligation as it is a means through which people are able to utilize “all the resources that God has created” [14].

Shatterproof Faith. The Islamic concept of “tawakkul” means “to struggle resolutely in the face of all the troubles and tribulations that befall one, trusting in Allah where one feels powerless” [17]. In this vein, the informants chose to place their trust in God and his higher plan. Studies have shown that religion plays a significant role in an individual’s coping [3]. Integrating the results of studies like that of Coloma and colleagues [18], which investigated the lived experiences of Typhoon Yolanda survivors, it can be observed that, regardless of what form adversity may take or what religion one may follow, Filipinos possess an innate resilience that is tempered by their faith.

V. CONCLUSION

The Marawi crisis took the home that was once familiar to the evacuees and turned it upside down. Having to leave under such dire circumstances, the Marawi evacuees suffered significant loss after leaving their homes. They especially felt the impact of their loss during the process of adjustment, having to face challenges such as a lack of resources and interactions with culturally insensitive residents. However, the resolve to overcome adversity, tempered by their faith and support from others, enabled the informants to look beyond the fragments left behind by the crisis and work towards a better future.

The researchers recommend that government agencies ensure the proper distribution of relief goods and services and create job programs for evacuees. That other victims of the crisis may become involved in their faith and in their religious community. That healthcare providers may become better equipped to provide culturally sensitive care to not only victims but also members of the minority. That society may become aware of their personal perceptions on minority groups and be respectful in interacting with members of these groups. That future researchers may look into the lived experiences of others involved in the crisis like the soldiers and those held hostage.

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