



THE FIRE VICTIMS DILEMMA: UNVEILING STORIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract: Fires disaster in the Philippines becomes a major concern in recent years, particularly in residential structures. This study explored the experiences of fire victims during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was participated by eight fire victims from Misamis Occidental, the northern part of Mindanao, Philippines. The participants were identified through the snowball sampling method. Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology was used in analyzing the data to come up with four meaningful themes, namely; 1) outpouring support from the community, 2) uncertainty and anxiety of the family situation, 3) guilt and accountability to the incident, and 4) strong faith in God. The results revealed that the participants exhibited a high amount of stress and anxiety during the incident especially that the Philippines are in lockdown due to the pandemic. However, it is highlighted that the result also shows the positive attitude among Filipinos is still alive. It is recommended following: strengthen the campaign of fire prevention, create local fire brigades, and provide psychological assessment and intervention to the fire incident. Lastly, but most importantly, to revive the traditional positive attitude of being a Filipinos.

Keywords: *Bayanihan, Filipinos, Fire Victims, Pandemic, Transcendental Phenomenology*

I. INTRODUCTION

Fire disaster is classified both natural and man-made causes. It is estimated that around 180,000 death globally, according to the annual report of the World Health Organization, which usually occurred in developing countries (WHO, 2018). It is a common occurrence in urban and rural settlements. This disaster is identified as a serious threat in social growth and economic development, including various tangible and intangible effects (Tan & Vicente, 2019). The tangible effects that contribute to physical harm to people and properties include destruction, property loss, and livelihoods. While intangible effects pertain to the indirect impacts on the victims' health and psychological well-being (Spoon, Hunter, Gerkey, Chhetri, Rai, Basnet, & Dewan, 2020; Mtani & Elinorata, 2018). Between 2011 and 2019, more than 1,300 fire incidents occurred in the Philippines, killing thousands of people and damaging more than Php 4 billion of properties (Villa, & Ceballos, 2021). Although, in the year 2020, there was a decreasing incident of 48 % compared to the previous years, according to the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP). But the top causes of fire incidents are still the same; these are the faulty electrical connections, lit cigarette butts, and open flames from unattended kitchens (Santiago, 2021; IFSEC, 2021).

Regardless of the causes and outcome of the disaster, one thing is sure that the victims are the lowest denominator of any fire disaster. Several studies confirmed that victims of disaster are associated with a negative impact on their mental and physical health. Further, it was observed by many researchers that the victims suffered psychological problems, which include anxiety, stress, and depression. Studies also highlighted that victims have psychosocial problems as ongoing sources and the manifestation of stress (Makwana, 2019; Stanley, 2012; Laugharne, 2011). All of these damages and losses happen before the strike of the Covid 19 pandemic. The pandemic brought devastating effects to the social, economic, and even political disruption throughout the world (Collins & Duffy, 2020; Chisty & Rahman, 2020; Tang, Lu, & Xu, 2018.). These circumstances have increases the encountered dilemma of the fire victims during the pandemic.

The victims are confronted with the losses and damages of property that have tremendous effects on their safety and livelihood and the possible exposure to covid-19 infections. Aside from it, the assistance offered by the victims' relatives, government and non-government organizations are hampered due to different border restrictions. Moreover, the infectious virus (COVID 19) gives additional health and psychological problems that increase anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and depression. All of these will add to the burden and suffering felt by the fire victims (Boyras, & Legros, 2020; Forte, Favieri, Tambelli, & Casagrande, 2020; Kaseda, & Levine, 2020; Rodríguez-Rey, Garrido-Hernansaiz, & Collado, 2020; Shevlin, McBride, Murphy, Miller, Hartman, Levita, & Bentall, 2020).

When the Philippines government declared a total lockdown last March 2020, the Misamis Occidental people have to endure a financial crisis brought by different border restriction effects (Asia News Monitor, 2020). It doubles the effects, particularly those eight fire victim families. Although several studies have already proven that the disaster victims are likely to have certain common experiences depending on the severity of the events. But no study explores Filipino fire victims' issues and challenges, particularly during the pandemic period. Hence, it is the intention of the study to dig and investigate the challenges faced by victims of fire disaster amid the pandemic and to understand their suffering, which will pave in the formulation of policy aid and assistance to be offered by both government and non-government organizations.

II. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The study employed a qualitative research design, specifically the Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology approach. This approach describes exploring and understanding the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to the social or human problem (Creswell, 2014). Moreover, transcendental phenomenology is the study of structures of experience or consciousness of the people being studied, which the qualitative researcher seeks to understand the complexity of human behavior (Moustakas, 1994; Tracy 2013). It has pointed out that transcendental phenomenological research is a design of inquiry coming from the philosophy and psychology that explores the participants' lived experiences. In this context, this approach is appropriate to obtain data on the fire victims' dilemma in facing their unique experiences. It can produce an in-depth understanding of the meaning and scope that cover the social context, as Broome (2011) mentioned.

This study was conducted in the Misamis Occidental, Philippines, located in the northern part of Mindanao. It was participated by eight fire victims and identified through the snowball sampling method. These participants were chosen based on the following criteria: (1) resident of Misamis Occidental, (2) head of the family, and (3) fire victims in the period of intense lockdown from March to May 2020. This study employed an open-ended interview using the research guide questions. Before the participants' actual interview, all questions were first evaluated and approved by the research panel. This process ensured that the questions were appropriate for eliciting relevant data from the participants. The participants' consent during the conduct of the study was the priority of the researchers prior to the actual interview. Also, voluntary, confidentiality, anonymity, and free from risk were among the ethical issues addressed by the researchers prior to the actual gathering of data. In analyzing the data, the researchers used the NVivo Software to generate the codes and develop significant themes. Cuevas (2020) mentioned that the final step in data analysis is to verify and validate the themes by seeking an external expert in phenomenological analysis who then check and validate the themes before it was applied in this study.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The eight voluntary participants of the study, where individually undergone an in-depth interview, they were asked to narrate, describe, and shared experiences as fire victims during the lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There are four meaningful themes: 1) outpouring support from the community, 2) uncertainty and anxiety from the family situation, 3) guilt and accountability to the incident, and; 4) strong faith in God.

1.1. Outpouring Support from the Community

Fire disasters occurred due to little or no precautionary steps for emergencies. It is a national security concern when it relates to disaster management and people's health. After the fire incident, one of the fire victims' difficulties is the process of coping with their situation, particularly the financial issues (Villa, & Ceballos, 2021; Kiran, & Corcoran, 2017; Quiroz, Walls, Cicione, & Smith, 2021). The food and shelter were

among the highly needed by the fire victims and their families. Their family and other relatives are willing to aid them in financial assistance and providing temporary shelter.

Participants shared that they were invited by their relatives to pack their things and leave with them temporarily. However, their relatives were located outside the border of Misamis Occidental. The problem of transportation and documentary passes to enter another border hinder them to seek assistance. It is also difficult for the relatives to visit and pick their fire victims' relatives due to the same reason-transportation and document passes. Gladly, the spirit of communal unity and cooperation dominate during this period. In the interview, the fire victims expressed their gratitude for their support from friends, neighbors, and the local government unit for their food and materials to start building their houses. These were expressed by the participants with a smile on their faces.

"Though it was really hard to accept, I am thankful because many helped arrive. We don't have any emergency funds because our income is sufficient for our daily expenses only. I also asked for help from the government, and we received money from the Municipality of Clarin and Province of Misamis Occidental." (P1)

"We also received cash and in-kind from the Barangay, neighbors, and relatives to recover from that incident." (P5)

"Our neighbors shared food with us for two days. After the 2nd day, our families from both sides supported us despite the pandemic. The fire department informed us that the government would give us monetary support after complying with the requirements." (P7)

Many Filipinos lost their homes and businesses because of fire incidents. Despite the fire incident, the Filipino attitude to help each other is observed in the study. The participants were glad by the donations they received after the disaster. Aside from it, the National and Provincial Government had extended monetary assistance to the fire victims in building their houses and start a business.

"I am thankful for God's grace because God provided us with helping hands – our neighbors, the religious sector, and the government. Our neighbors contributed a lot. We received a total of Php50, 000 from the government and used it to buy necessities and immediate essentials such as food and a bed to sleep with (P2)."

"The Governor just gave Php30, 000 and Php20, 000 from our Mayor, a total budget of Php 50,000 are the same to all fire victims during that time aside from the help from our relatives, friends, and neighbors (P3).

"Because of the help that we received, we started to stand from the fire incident little by little." (P 8)

This attitude is known for the Filipino as "*Bayanihan*", a Filipino attitude of helping one another, especially in times of need without expecting anything in return. It believes that helping others, particularly their "*kababayans*" (fellow countrymen), is a duty of all Filipinos (Montefrio, 2020; Eadie, & Su, 2018; Su, & Mangada, 2016). This study confirmed that the *Bayanihan* spirit still lives among Filipinos and demonstrates in many forms. Those who participate in the *Bayanihan* provide not only the monetary form but also emotional and psychological support to the victims of the disaster.

1.2. Uncertainty and Anxiety of Family Situation

This theme recognized the interpersonal crisis felt by all victims and their immediate families. They felt uncertainty and anxiety because of the loss of property. They had been working hard to acquire their houses, business, and properties, but in just one glimpse, everything was burned. All their financial and emotional investment was gone due to this fire incident. They worried about their daily needs to survive. It also added the burden of the potential strike of the Covid -19 pandemic and the difficulties in travel and finding jobs and opportunities. These are their shared statement with sadness on their faces:

"I feel sad because my house was burnt and I don't have enough money to rebuild it. I also feel sorry for myself because I am not earning, and it's my wife that looks for our living." (P1)

"I felt so devastated because we worked hard in building the house and acquiring the property. I felt disappointed because we are not rich and can't afford directly to build the house. My father is sick, an old bedridden, and I am the only breadwinner of our family." (P5)

"I felt so nervous and can't accept it, and I spent three sleepless nights sleeping in the sand with a tent. I cried a lot, realizing that I don't have a house anymore; my husband spent years abroad to build our house, and it just vanished in five minutes. I really can't accept the fact. I always cried, thinking about rebuilding our house again, knowing that we only live through my husbands' daily wage. I have three children, and one of them is a special child." (P3)

Residential fires can lead to severe emotional distress. Not only does losing the house in a fire mean losing the home, but also many other valuable objects, such as pertinent papers and other things with sentimental value. The impact of disasters like fire and pandemic greatly lead to mental health consequences, Posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, and other mental health consequences (Boyratz, & Legros, 2020; Forte et al., 2020; Kaseda, & Levine, 2020; Rodríguez-Rey, Garrido-Hernansaiz, & Collado, 2020; Shevlin et al., 2020). These were experiences by the participants:

"I kept on thinking about our house. I spent years acquiring things and building the house. Our house has complete appliances, and our refrigerator was bought in less than a year. I had a Php 45,000 in my cash box, which I got from a 5/6 lending; I told the firemen not to let anyone enter our house, thinking that the money can be saved." (P4)

"I always looked at our burned house and started to worry about everything. I felt sad. After all, we need to start from zero because we couldn't save our things. I thought it's just me that worried, but I have also seen my children do the same thing, looking into our house with a sad face and a worried aura, without a word." (P7)

"I felt sad about the house we built four years ago since we just bought part of the lot to live near the market. I also worried about our daily needs, especially this time, it is difficult to find a job during this pandemic." (P5)

How parents or caregivers handle crises has a big impact on a child's ability to cope. Since children look to adults for guidance, encouragement, and knowledge, it's critical to work toward good coping so that you can be a positive role model for their children. (Romero, López-Romero, Domínguez-Álvarez, Villar, & Gómez-Fraguela, 2020; Weiss, & Lunskey, 2011). This concern was highlighted by Participant 8, and he pitied himself for the stressful memories of his children brought by the fire incident.

"I pitied myself as a father because I cannot fulfill my task to my children due to the situation (Covid 19 pandemic) and incident that we had experienced. At first, I did not feel any sadness because of the help and donations that we received; however, I always think of the challenge of starting all over again." (P8)

Many people affected by the disaster are still struggling with tension, anxiety, and depression. The victims were overburdened with the challenge of restoring their homes and dealing with the devastating loss of community (Espinoza, 2018; Klein et al., 2019). Fire disasters are associated with a negative impact on victims' mental and physical health, their families, and professional and voluntary responders to the disasters. Exposure to critical incidents or traumatic events often results in a stress reaction termed "critical incident stress." Depending on the intensity and persistence of the event, and personal resilience to the extreme stressor, this critical incident stress can progress to more severe mental health conditions (Carey et al., 2021; Fraess-Phillips et al., 2017; Laugharne, 2011; Kumagai, Edwards, & Carroll, 2006).

1.3. Guilt and Accountability to the Incident

This theme emerged from the four participants where they felt guilty and accountable for the incident. Although the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) declares it as an accident event, but the fact that the fire originated in their houses, the guilt and ashamed still affect them. They know that the negligence among their family members causes the fire incident. These are their statement:

"My wife felt the guilty and accountability of the incident because she forgot to unplug the rice cooker which causes the fire. I feel ashamed also of our neighbors because we were the reason for the fire incident." (P7).

"In the second floor, in the kitchen. I am not sure if my wife forgot to extinguish the firewood's or she forgot to unplug the water heater, but things that the fire started in our house, I really felt guilt and accountability of the incident." (P6)

"Aside from the guilt and accountability I felt, I also fear to what might their family do to us since the fire originated at my house, and we can't deny the blame that if only someone would have watched the children, the fire would not have occurred." (P5)

"I told her a lot of times, but you know the old person they were difficult to control, but if I was only here, it might not happen the fire may easily extinguish because I will splash it with water." (P2)

Studies have been revealed that the most involved structure in the fire incident in the Philippines is the residential type than other structure (Wadud, & Huda, 2017; Balahadia, Dadiz, Ramirez, Luvett, Jay-ar, & Lagman, 2019). The top three causes of fire, according to BFP reports, are defective electrical connections, lit cigarette butts, and open fire from unattended stoves. (ABS-CBN News, 2018; IFSEC 2021; Villa, & Ceballos, 2021). It has been confirmed that the major causes of fire are mainly associated with anthropogenic or man-made causes. It further explained that the top causes are human negligence and carelessness. Hence, it cannot deny the guilty and accountability felt by some fire victims, which has an additional negative impact on the psychological well-being (Ibrahim, 2020; Tan et al., 2020).

1.4. Strong Faith in God

It is prevalent for individuals to experience many phases of transition, including shock, dissatisfaction, depression, and hopelessness. However, when the victims enter a level of acceptance and step past disbelief, bitterness, and sorrow. The recovery or coping started to develop and emphasize toward the future, optimistic emotions will begin to re-emerge. Security, protection, and comfort are restored, and life once again moves forward (Curtis, 2017; Ward, Raue, Lee, D'Ambrosio, & Coughlin, 2017). Despite the participants' negative impact, they were still thankful to God for the guidance and blessings. The spiritual aspect of the participants serves as a fighting gear towards the disaster that they encountered. The participants expressed the following statements:

"Pray to God for good health. It is important to keep away from fire and always be mindful." (P1)

"My advice is that we should always pray to God to avoid calamities." (P3)

"We have to accept this faith and trust God. Everything will be fine if we have trust in our God. From time to time, we can get up and rebuild again. We have to accept it because it was a disaster. Yes, it was so hard, yet we can't do anything from it aside from praying and ask for healing from above". (P4)

"Let's just do the right thing that can elevate our situation. Let's pray to God that He will open our eyes so that we will see what we should do to solve this problem and struggles in life". (P6)

"We need to be good and generous to everyone, surely it will reciprocate, and we also need to trust that we can do all things with God's guidance, just think positive." (P7)

Putting God as the center of everything is a Filipino practice to overcome any unwanted happen of their lives. It is a tradition of all Filipinos to seek guidance and divine intervention to surpass the challenges they encountered. For the participants, believing in God's divine guidance and grace is their foundation for coping with the situation. Various studies proved that a strong belief in the divine spirit is among the coping mechanism to surpass and enlighten the physical, psychological, and social well-being (Fide & Alino, 2020; Manning, Ferris, Narvaez Rosario, Prues, & Bouchard, 2019). Moreover, studies have also proven that faith in God may increase the frequency of positive emotions and reduce the likelihood that stress will result in emotional disorders (Vail III, Soenke, & Waggoner, 2019; Schieman, Bierman, Upenieks, & Ellison, 2017; Koenig, 2012).

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There can be no doubt that fire incidents are among the Philippines' prevalent disasters, particularly in residential areas in urban and rural places. For the fire victims, it brought devastating effects to the psychological, social, and economic stability. The pose of the covid-19 pandemic gives the additional burden and hampers the process of their recovery. This circumstance creates a dilemma for the fire victims and their families. The uncertainty, anxiety, guilt, and accountability to the incident are the negative consequence of their experiences. However, the study also proved that the Filipinos' traditional attitude is still alive in this modern day. The presence of *Bayanihan* or communal unity and cooperation in times of difficulties and the strong believers to the divine intervention is the positive attitudes that pulled the Filipino fire victims from their situation.

From the result of the study, it is recommended to strengthen the campaign of fire prevention, particularly in residential areas. It is beneficial to create local fire brigade volunteers who will receive constant training from the Bureau of Fire Protection Personnel. These local fire brigades are the first responders to any fire that erupted in the neighborhood. It is recognized in this study the extent of financial assistance from the local and provincial government to the fire victims. Nonetheless, it is highly recommended that the government provide psychological assessment and intervention programs, particularly to the children, to ease the fire incident's negative impact. Lastly, and most important to the community that every individual should strive to revive the traditional positive attitude of being a Filipino, such as, but not limited to *Bayanihan*, and strong faith in God.

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