

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# Experiences with Typhoon Yolanda: The voices of young survivors revealed

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## ABSTRACT

The Philippines has often been visited with natural calamities like typhoons. The perspectives of the children who experienced and survived these calamities were documented to understand the meaning of these experiences to them. Hence, this study explored the experiences of children during Typhoon Yolanda. Through a phenomenological inquiry, rich descriptions captured the uniqueness of the phenomena through the lived experiences of the young and the way they experienced these challenges at a young age. This was conducted in a rural barangay in the northern part of Cebu, Philippines where they were badly hit by the typhoon. Data were gathered using focus group interview of ten children who were carefully selected based on their actual experience of the typhoon, able to relate themselves and were permitted to join in the study. Data were analyzed using Collaizzi's approach using its prescribed ten steps. The following themes emerged: a) helping engagement before, during and after a traumatic event and b) attachment and emotional resilience. Despite the transient trauma that children experienced with Typhoon Yolanda, they were able to move on and learn from such experience.

**Key Words:** Typhoon Yolanda, Typhoon Haiyan, Children, Disaster, Life, Resilience, Engagement

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Natural disasters such as the super typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Typhoon Yolanda bring about different experiences in individuals across all ages.<sup>[1]</sup> The aftermath of its devastation left thousands not just homeless but also scampering on how to live their lives in their typhoon stricken landscapes which were once their homes. Typhoon "Yolanda" destroyed not only properties of those affected but it also destroyed their lives and their future. The most vulnerable of these victims are the children. The US-based Save the Children estimated 4.6 million children have been affected by Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan), with many witnessing the devastation first hand as their homes were swept away by the typhoon.<sup>[2]</sup> The children are not only at risk physically to the harsh environment but also psychologically. The physical illnesses that the children

may acquire may resolve given the right medication and the right treatment. But the psychological pain and suffering that they may have acquired from the typhoon experience may not resolve easily and will stay to haunt them for the rest of their lives.

This study explored the experiences of children during a natural disaster. Through a phenomenological inquiry, rich descriptions capturing the uniqueness of the phenomena through the lived experiences of children, the way they experienced these challenges. The essence of listening to the voices of the younger group of victims of Typhoon Yolanda creates a better way of understanding these children specially those who went through a disaster. It is also important to document the experiences of these children living in the northern

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part of Cebu, Philippines in order to provide an in depth information of their experiences.

This study was conceived to investigate the experiences of children during Typhoon Haiyan or Yolanda. Furthermore, this study allowed the researchers to make recommendations on the immediate psychological care for children who are affected by calamities and will be affected by future calamities, and to create safe places for children's expression of feelings and emotions. Various literatures reviewed focused most on the psychological effect of disasters on adults but there is limited literatures and researches delving on the psychological effect of calamities on children, thus then importance of undertaking this study.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted in April 2015 in a rural area in the northern part of Cebu, Philippines. This was conducted in one of the barangays most devastated areas during the Yolanda (Haiyan) landfall in Cebu, Philippines. This study utilized Husserl's descriptive phenomenology. This approach is concerned with understanding the lived experience and how participants themselves make sense of the experience. Further, it is concerned with the meaning with which the experience holds for the participants. Moreover, this approach considers the researcher's own conceptions which are required to make sense of that other personal world. 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.<sup>[3]</sup> This study focused on the unique experiences of children during Typhoon Haiyan or Yolanda. The phenomenological approach used in this study provides the description of these experiences in children. Prior to the conduct of the study, an approval from the Local Government Unit Social Welfare Office was obtained as entry permit to the barangay. With the assistance of the local chief, the researchers obtained consent from the guardians/parents of the children involved in the study. To address risk of the study, debriefing was done by a trained faculty after the conduct of every focus group interview to address psychological after effects of the recall of events.

The study participants were children ranging from 8 to 14 years old. They were identified using the following criteria: (1) willing to join the study as a respondent, (2) the parents gave consent for the child to join the study, (3) the child is in the locality before, during and 24 hours after the typhoon occurred, (4) able to vividly recall the incident by narrating the whole occurrence before it occurred, during the actual occurrence and 24 hours after its occurrence. There were ten (10) children who volunteered to join the focus group inter-

view. They were allowed to join the focus group interview after parental consent was obtained. The researchers conducted a focus-group interview as a means of data collection utilizing guide questions formulated by the researchers. The focus-group interview used open ended questions using the interview guide for the facilitator to follow.

The following guide questions were used in the focus group interview:

- (1) Describe to us how you felt when you knew that a typhoon is coming?
- (2) Where you in your home before, during and a day after the typhoon?
- (3) Narrate to us the preparations you did for the typhoon.
- (4) Narrate to us your experiences during the typhoon.
- (5) Describe to us your situation during the typhoon.
- (6) Describe to us the situation after the typhoon.
- (7) What did you feel when you saw the devastation?
- (8) What are the initial activities you did after the typhoon?

The use of Focus Group interview in phenomenology has been argued upon since phenomenology seeks essential characteristics or essences of phenomena in a manner that requires an individual to describe their experiences in an uncontaminated way. However, authors state that focus groups are congruent with phenomenological research and extend this argument further by proposing that group interviews in phenomenology are acceptable since this allow the sharing of experiences more meaningful and comprehensive.<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover, the use of FGD in phenomenology depends on the underpinnings of the authors of the study which is basically to document the voices of experiences of the young during Typhoon Yolanda. 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.<sup>[5]</sup>

Prior to the data gathering, permission from the barangay captain of the locale of the study was obtained. This was then followed by the identification of the informants in order to acquire the parents' and guardians' consent in behalf of the children. Audio-taping of the focus group interview was also part of the consent acquired from parents and guardians. The study was conducted at the time and venue mutually agreed by the barangay captain, informants' parents and guardians and the researchers.

Before the focus-group discussion, bracketing was undertaken by the facilitator and the researchers prevent bias and to stop the researcher's assumptions and beliefs from influencing the research process. Bracketing is an important

method of phenomenology within phenomenological nursing research today<sup>[6]</sup> and is utilized as a skill in nursing research providing scientific rigor. According to Giorgi<sup>[7]</sup> it is the researcher and not the participants who engage in bracketing, for it is the participants' natural attitude the researcher is attempting to understand. Records of the non-verbal cues were kept as part of the analysis. After the discussions, the researchers did a follow-up interview which will be done in order to clarify things and get additional data.

The researchers ensured that the informants' parents and guardians were able to comprehensively understand the study with all due consideration of their level of understanding. Before signing the consent, every informant's parents and guardians were explained about the process of focus-group interview and anonymity was preserved. Consent for audio recording were requested from parents and guardians. Debriefing was conducted after the group interviews by a nurse psychiatrist. The informants were asked to validate the data collected. All the data gathered were destroyed after the completion of the study.

The researchers used Colaizzi's approach to phenomenological analysis. The researchers listened to the audio recordings and transcribed the recorded discussions in order to understand the informants' experiences. Colaizzi's method of data analysis consists of seven steps:<sup>[8]</sup>

- (1) Read and re read all the participants' verbatim transcripts of the phenomena in order to acquire a feeling for them.
- (2) Significant statements or phrases are extracted from participants' transcripts pertaining directly to the research phenomena.
- (3) Formulated meanings are constructed from the significant statements.
- (4) Formulated meanings are arranged into clusters themes which evolve into emergent themes.
- (5) Incorporation of the results into a rich and exhaustive description of the lived experience.
- (6) Validation of the exhaustive description from the participants involved in the research.
- (7) Incorporation of any new or pertinent data obtained from participants' validation, and adapted to attain congruence with the lived experience of the participants' studied.

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. The responses from each participant demonstrated that their tran-

scripts accurately depicted what was said during the FGD and represented their experiences during the typhoon.

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Generic assumptions cannot be made about the way children will respond to disasters. It's very much an individual situation. When disasters strike, it is often children who are hardest hit. Their vulnerabilities on physical and emotional aspects are often disturb in crisis situations like in cases of disaster.<sup>[9]</sup>

#### Theme 1: Helping engagement before, during and after a traumatic event

In the wake of Typhoon Yolanda, children demonstrated their interest and capabilities in helping out protect themselves and their families. Through information gathered from the media and from elders, they anticipated and feared the typhoon. But despite these apprehensions, they still involve themselves in the preparations and evacuation as well. Despite their young age and less exposure to disasters, they were able to grasp and effectively took part in the activities of the adult before, during and after the typhoon. The pureness of their intentions to help and be part of the world of the adults in the course of Typhoon Yolanda showed a process of relieving themselves of the fears and anxieties they felt.

Helping engagement before, during and after a Traumatic Event was developed through the sub-themes: a) Media Influence on Children's Fear and Move to Action and b) Acting as Young helpers.

#### *Media influence on children's fear and move to action*

The children went through a sense of heightened anxiety when they heard from the radio and the elders that there is a super typhoon coming. Through these information, different perceptions of what's going to happen was felt by the children.

"We heard news from radio that we need to evacuate because of the strong wind"

"We heard news that roofs will fly (because of the strong wind)"

"We were afraid when we heard the news from radio or cellphone. (some says, crying)"

"Afraid. It was said in the news that the typhoon is strong."

"(Because [paused]...the radio says it is strongest typhoon of all, all those who will be passed, stronger than typhoon Frank)"

"I was also afraid that somebody will be hit by the galvanized iron."

“Our house was already weak and it easily fell down. I was afraid.”

“I was afraid mam. We might get into accident. Like in Tacloban ma’am Because they did not believe (the news)”

The children’s involvement in disasters is related with the information they got from different sources. Disasters can be chaotic, confusing, and frightening events, both for those who experience them directly and for those who learn about them through the media.<sup>[10]</sup>

Experiencing a disaster directly can cause posttraumatic stress reactions, anxiety, fear, worry, grief, and behavioral problems in young people. Media coverage of disasters can also cause distress in children and adolescents. This means that young people who live through a disaster may be further upset by media coverage of that disaster, and also that youth living far from a disaster can become afraid or worried by media coverage of a disaster that occurs somewhere else.<sup>[10]</sup>

The more disaster media coverage a young person sees, the more afraid or upset he or she may become. Media coverage of a disaster may cause children and adolescents to worry about what is happening, which in turn causes them to want to watch more of the disaster coverage to get more information, which can then cause them to worry even more. Younger children may be even more frightened by disaster media coverage than older youth. Video and images of injury, death, and destruction may be particularly upsetting for younger children.<sup>[10]</sup>

### **Acting as young helpers**

At the height of the disaster, children also played a role. They were involved in the efforts for survival. They took part in the preparation for the coming typhoon. Some of them went through the motions of packing their things specially those which are easily damaged by the typhoon. The children reported how they got involved.

“We packed. . . clothes. Then we transferred to the house of kuan, grandfather. . . (their house) is slightly elevated. And it (lolo’s house) is more sturdy.”

“We prepared mam. We kept...aw...we packed our electronic gadgets like DVD sets, TV. We kept in kuan. . . areas that cannot be easily hit. . . If it ( house) topples down. Secret place. It cannot be easily. . . like something might fell on it it will be destroyed.”

“We also prepared, after we packed our clothes, we wrap them, we cooked then placed them in

containers then we evacuated and bought canned sardines. We evacuated in the school.”

### **Theme 2: Attachment and emotional resilience**

The ability of a child or adult to mentally represent himself and others without distortion is a major factor in resilience. Resilience is a product of how people perceive, appraise, approach and tackle stresses and challenges.<sup>[11]</sup> Moreover, a child who has been exposed to a traumatic incident develops resilience by attachment to significant others. Attachment to a parent in the family provides a channel of expressing themselves and the trauma they are experiencing. It provides connection to others and aids in developing a secure internal environment. This theme is consists of: a) Transient Mental Trauma, b) Parents as source of security and c) Resilience.

#### **Transient mental trauma**

After the typhoon, the children experienced mental trauma but it was only temporary. Their trauma was manifested by crying when sudden change of the weather occurs and sleep disturbances. They were afraid that the typhoon will come recur in their place, and suffer the same experience again.

“Cry. Because I constantly think it might come again.”

“Cannot sleep for a day.”

“The sadness. Because it was very difficult uy. That time it was a very difficult experience in that tragedy.”

“Cry ma’am. Everytime the wind becomes stronger. (I cry) because I recall (the event).”

The psychological effects caused by a natural disaster can linger years into a child’s life, long after communities have been rebuilt and emotions have leveled. The effects, both good and bad, can be shaped by a child’s support system, which can include counselors, teachers and caregivers.<sup>[12]</sup>

#### **Parents as source of security**

In the preparation for the typhoon, children were instructed by their parents and elders to do certain chores and tasks prior to evacuation. They cited that they listened to their parents and elders in doing the tasks and when they should proceed to the evacuation center.

Children tend to listen to the instructions of their parents at the height of the calamity.

“Then in the morning, we woke up early. Then his (pointing to another child) Papa (father) said we have to evacuate because it (typhoon) is really strong, so we evacuated.”

“The roof of the house we evacuated to slowly, the ceiling fell. My father said, we will transfer to another classroom because this ceiling is about to fall. We ran again, if we were not able to transfer we could have been included in the accident ma’am.”

During the course of the typhoon, one of the informants shared that in fear, she stayed with her mother. She stayed with her mother as a form of security that she felt safe being with her mother.

“I got nervous, panicked, about to panic. I stayed with my mama ma’am.”

Children’s functioning may be influenced by how their parents and other caregivers cope during and after the disaster. Children often turn to adults for information, comfort, and help. Children and adolescents do better when they understand the event they have just gone through.<sup>[13]</sup>

### **Resilience**

After the typhoon, the informants shared that they went through doing things to help out address the need to the situation. Although some of them shared their sentiments for what happened, the sadness that they felt for their loss but most of them focused more in going back to their regular routine.

Most of the shared that:

“I was sad because when we sleep, we will all get wet.”

“I was sad because our bureau was destroyed. Our clothes were wet. Some of them were thrown away because it does not smell good”

“Sad. Our house was destroyed”

“Sad. The roof was already thrown away. We do not have roofing”

But these were all temporary as the children reported how they reacted to the incident as if nothing happened.

“We cleaned, and traced our things. Our basin was flown and it transferred to our neighbor’s.”

“At first, we looked at our house, our galvanized roof was gone, it was blown off. So we repaired it, we put at our TV properly.”

“After the storm, we went to our house and put back our roof.”

“I was happy because there were aids that arrived.”

And most of all, they shared that they made use of whatever is available for food after the storm. They showed adjustment to the situation and a certain sense of resilience despite the trauma they have encountered.

“Whatever fell down, we ate banana, pomelo, coconut, sweet potato, cassava”

“There were bananas that fell, so we cooked them”

Some children will have great tolerance and resilience to disasters, while others will be far more vulnerable. Factors at play include a child’s psychological makeup before the event, in addition to the presence or absence of a buffering adult.<sup>[14]</sup> Children tend to postpone aspects of processing traumatic events until they reach particular developmental stages; they respond age-appropriately, and that response will likely not be a one-time event.<sup>[14]</sup> Yet paradoxically, while children are physically more vulnerable than adults, they have an inner strength that adults do not always possess. Often they are very resilient and they may be more able to adapt to change.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Lived experience of children in Typhoon Haiyan or Yolanda: An exhaustive description**

The experiences of children with a strong typhoon is initiated with the bits of information that they heard about the type of typhoon they anticipated to arrive in their place. This information contributed to the anxiety and fear that children felt prior to the typhoon. Due to this anxiety, children opted to be involved and obey their parents and elders in the preparation prior to the typhoon, during the evacuation process as well as after the typhoon. The aftermath of the typhoon brought mental trauma to children through disturbed dreams but this was only temporary as they assailed through the experience as if nothing happened. They manifested a resiliency that started with their attachment to a parent figure. Their experiences were most remembered and recalled by the children but they continued to live and learned to adopt changes in their lifestyle.

## **4. IMPLICATIONS TO THE WORLD**

The experiences of typhoons and other calamities are considered traumatic to an adult much more for a child. Young as they are, children possess intelligence that enable them to react negatively to any information that they hear. Children therefore need time for adults to explain to them these information to correct misconceptions and determine how the child is reacting to the information received. This process enables them express their feelings so as to make them understand the real situation. Children elders and parents to help them overcome fears and anxiety. Parents and elders

are a source of strength to them. It is therefore necessary to spend time and give attention to the children's feelings and concerns to enable them to adjust appropriately to disaster experiences.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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