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Perception, Resiliency and Coping Strategies of Filipinos amidst Disasters

ABSTRACT

The Philippines often experiences different calamities and disasters. Despite that, Filipinos remain to be resilient and positive seemingly immune on such circumstances. Most Filipino survivors are able to cope with disaster experiences but others may continuously feel anxious and reacts negatively for so long that could probably lead to mental problems like psychological trauma if not assisted. This paper will discuss the Filipino's perception of disasters and their resiliency as they encounter such adversities. This will also address how Filipinos are able to accept misfortunes and tragedies and then eventually recover from these events. The findings of this paper will give us a glimpse on the Filipino's outlook in life after facing stressful experiences and the resilience and strategies in coping with such events which other people could adapt in times of painful and hurtful situations. A person's resilience and strategies and the individual perceptions of such situations are three of the most important tools which could keep the individual going and project a positive outlook in life.

Keywords: Disaster, Perception, Resiliency, Coping Strategies, Filipinos

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines being located along the Ring of Fire and the Typhoon Belt is exposed to tropical storms and suffered from various natural calamities such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and flooding. According to the World Risk Report, Philippines ranked third as one of the most disastrous countries in the world in the year 2013. This is due to its location along the Ring of Fire and the Typhoon Belt. On the average, 20 typhoons visit the Philippines annually and leave trails of devastation in their wakes which prove the very vulnerable position in the Philippines in terms of disaster vulnerability. These disasters do not only result to physical injuries and material damages but also psychological harm.

Despite the country's situation, the people keep its good disposition in everyday living. As Estanislao in 2001 (pg. 104) said, "there is a cultural tendency in the Philippines to deny the presence of depression and to endure and to suffer in silence." Despite such vulnerability that seemingly predispose a Filipino towards self-annihilation and other destructive behaviors, the perception remains that Filipinos are indeed one of the happiest people in the world (Tiangco, 2005, pg.58). Filipinos have had learned how to pack their burdens correctly so as to bear its weight more lightly (*magaan tayong magdala*) (Bankoff, 2009, pg.106). It is as if Filipinos have taken this kind of situation as part of everyday living or aspect of daily life. It is so ordinary that Filipino cultures are partly the product of adaptation by communities to these phenomena through processes that permit the incorporation of threat into daily life, or what can be called "normalization of threat" (Bankoff, 2009, pg.226).

Filipinos learned to develop their own coping mechanisms to survive. Coping is the process of actively managing the demands on the community that are appraised as extremely stressful, as taxing their capacities or exceeding their personal and/or community resources (Ignacio, 2010, pg.60). As Filipinos' develop their own ways to cope to these kinds of situations, their resiliency begins to flaunt. Resilience is the ability to recover and regain readily one's form or particular state, to "rise from the rubble" and recover without intervention, cognizant of the fact that every person has a natural physical and intrapsychic capacity to recover without interventions (Ignacio, 2010, pg.57). The people's will to take chances and risks, no matter what difficulties and problems the future entails, is necessary for a nation's growth and destiny (Gorospe, 1994, pg.60). Just like the Filipino attitude locally called "Bahala na" mentality which according to Gorospe might be the root of all positive values of risk taking, entrepreneurship, and social responsibility and could also be a genuine form of trust and faith in the Divine Providence that presume self-reliance.

The research problematizes on finding out what remains essential and what has changed in the Filipino way of facing disasters especially after the devastation of super typhoon Haiyan and several record breaking disasters in the country. The paper examines the shared perception, resiliency and coping mechanism of the people in the face of calamities.

METHODOLOGY

The research is designed as a descriptive case study. Focused group discussions are used to collect qualitative data from the participants which are residents of Marilao in the province of Bulacan. One hundred residents from the flood prone barangays are purposively selected to participate in the group discussions. The profile of the respondents are as follows: twenty five (25) barangay officials, twenty five (25) teachers, twenty five (25) health workers, and twenty five (25) residents. The group discussions were facilitated by dividing the respondents into ten (10) groups, with ten (10) members per group.

The paper used thematic content analysis to analyze qualitative information and to produce comparable and evaluative data from the transcriptions gathered from the group discussions. Emerging themes and patterns on the perception, resiliency, and coping mechanisms of the participants were identified and discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research explores how Filipinos, in the case of selected Bulacan residents, perceive calamities and face the wrath and aftermath of these disasters. Particularly, the study looks into the (1) perception, (2) resiliency and (3) coping strategies of Filipinos in the face of disasters. Further analysis is made by categorizing the statements of the respondents into themes that generalize the responses of the residents.

Perception

Disasters occur as natural phenomena but acquire meanings which are socially constructed by the people who experience these (Bankoff, 2009; Café, 2010). These meanings are oftentimes more important than the scientific explanations for the people measure their actions based on their perceived reality. Respondents to the study gave a quite coherent perception and understanding of what disasters are. Majority of the coded statements would exhibit meanings that connote two major themes: (1) disasters are consequences of human actions and (2) disasters are frequent life experiences. The results (see Table 1) of the group discussions on perception are in consonance with what Bankoff (2009) noted regarding Filipino perception of disasters as part of everyday life. He attributed this to the geophysical condition of the Philippines being at the

crossroads of typhoons which may also explain the findings of this study. Other emerging perceptions include the understanding of disasters as either acts of God or a kind of punishment and challenge to the people (e.g. “This is one way of saying that people have become bad, it is like a wake-up call.”)

Table 1. Examples of statements on the perception of disasters.

STATEMENTS	THEMES
Calamities happen because of irresponsible human actions and the lack of concern for the environment. (<i>Ang mga kalamidad ay nangyayari dahil na rin sa mga taong irresponsible at walang pakialam sa paligid at kalikasan</i>).	Consequence of Human actions
Typhoons happen because of the continued destruction of the environment such as the cutting of trees, mining and burning (of garbages). (<i>Nagkaroon ng bagyo dahil na rin sa patuloy na pagkasira ng kapaligiran o kalikasan tulad ng pagpuputol ng puno, mining at pagsisiga</i>).	Consequence of Human actions
A calamity is a naturally occurring event that is inevitable, but the effects may be lessened if people will be prepared and help one another. (<i>Ang kalamidad ay isang natural na pangyayaring hindi natin maiiwasan ngunit ang epekto nito ay malilimitahan kung ang lahat ng tao ay magiging handa at magtutulungan</i>)	Frequent life experiences
It is natural to experience such kind of calamities. What is not normal is, it's as if we do not learn from it. We do the same preparations and precautions. (<i>Natural lang ang pagkakaroon ng mga ganitong kalamidad. Ang hindi nga lang normal ay ang kung gaanong parang hindi naman tayo natututo sa mga ito. Paulit-ulit lang yung ginagawa nating preparations and precautions.</i>)	Frequent life experiences

Resilience is the ability to recover and regain readily one's form or particular state, to “rise from the rubble” and recover without intervention, cognizant of the fact that every person has a natural physical and intrapsychic capacity to recover without interventions (Ignacio, 2010, pg.57). Most of the respondents uttered statements that exhibit themes namely: (1) Faith-based Resiliency, (2) Familial Support, (3) Sense of Humor, (4) Positivity, (5) Bayanihan Spirit and lastly, (5) Flexibility (see Table 2). Faith-based resiliency, familial support, and sense of humor rose up in terms of frequency among the descriptors of resiliency. These findings show that Filipino resiliency is culturally based on values of deep spirituality, strong family ties and a good disposition in life. Traditional support systems persist mainly because of the traditional nature of Philippine society and partly because of the inadequacy of government services that address disaster preparedness.

Table 2. Example of Statements on Resiliency

Statements	Themes
I always pray for me and my family to overcome the challenges, I feel relieved after. (<i>“palagi akong nananalangin para malampasan naming pamilya ang pagsubok kaya nakakaramdam ako ng kaginhawaan pagkatapos”</i>)	Faith-Based Resiliency
We entrust to the Lord everything that happens. (<i>“ipinapagkatiwala namin sa Panginoon ang mga nangyayari”</i>).	Faith-Based Resiliency
But despite the tragedies, I will remain smiling and strong because of my family. I always think that it feels good to live together with my loved ones... (<i>Ngunit sa kabila ng mga sakunang ito mananatili akong nakangiti at matatag dahil sa aking pamilya. Lagi kong iniisip na napakasarap mabuhay kasama aking mga mahal sa buhay...</i>)	Familial Support
We talk about what happened, for example, we make fun of those who swim on the flood... (<i>“Pinagkukuwentuhan naming ano mga nagyari, halimbawa, ginagawa naming katatawanan yung mga lumalangoy sa tubig baha...</i>).	Sense of Humor
We are hoping to see the sun rise again in the midst of us every time that there is a calamity. (<i>Umaasa kami na masisilayan muli ang sikat ng araw mula sa kalagitnaan ang nagpapatatag sa amin tuwing may kalamidad.</i>)	Positivity
Despite these calamities, we unite and help one another. (<i>Kahit na may ganitong mga kalamidad, nagkakaisa kami at nagtutulungan parin.</i>)	Bayanihan spirit
Filipinos are good to adapt whether it may be to a person, event, or typhoon. (<i>Ang mga Pilipino ay marunong makiayon sa anumang bagay, tao man ito, pangyayari o unos.</i>)	Flexibility

Coping Strategies

Coping is the process of actively managing the demands of the community that are appraised as extremely stressful, as taxing their capacities or exceeding their personal and/or community resources (Ignacio, 2010, pg.60). Coping is thus expanding conscious effort to solve personal and interpersonal problems, and seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress or conflict (Amory, 2011, pg.357). The research utilized F. Landa Jocano’s categorization of Filipino coping mechanism namely (1) Bahala na, (2) Humor, and (3) Bayanihan (see Table 3). “Bahala na” involves risk taking which definition covers that of playing in a game of chance to a passive acceptance of fate and optimistic calculation of consequences. This category includes the attitude of leaving unto the divine or unto fate things that seem out of human control. Bayanihan on the other hand is building and participating in a social support system founded on Filipino values of *pakikisama* and *pakikisalamuha* (roughly translated as camaraderie, unity or togetherness). Last among the categories is sense of humor which according to Jocano is shared among Filipinos across different ethnicities. This behavior enables people to laugh in the midst of disasters and find meaning in the face of problems. Empirical studies show that humor moderates the impact of stress has been accumulating over the past 25 years (Lefcourt, 2005, pg.104). In one of the

study of Martin and Lefcourt in 1983, they found that good set of humor functioned as a buffer to lessen the negative impact of stress on mood (Weiten, Dunn, & Jammer, 2012, pg104). The study, beyond Jocano's categorization, is able to identify other themes that describe coping strategies. One of those is Rational Thinking which is according to Albert Ellis is seeing or rationalizing negative situations in a more acceptable way.

Table 3. Examples of Coping Strategies

Statements	Themes
We just leave everything to God; we think that (He) will never forsake us...(<i>Ipinagpapasa Diyos nalang naming ang lahat, iniisip namin na hindi naman kami pababayaan...</i>)	<i>Bahala na.</i>
We believe that eventually this will come to an end, what's important is we are together.(<i>Naniniwala kami na matatapos din ang lahat ng problemang ito, ang mahalagamagkakasama kami</i>).	<i>Bahala na</i>
We talk to our neighbors to make each other strong. (" <i>Naguusap kaming magkakapitbahay upang patatagin ang loob ng bawat isa</i> ").	<i>Bayanihan Spirit</i>
We need to be selfless, learn how to sacrifice, and develop the sense of nationalism, so that we could be one, has one goal to help our brethren who are in misery and those who need help. (<i>Kailangan natin maging selfless, matutong magsakripisyo, at i-develop ang sense of nationalism para maging solid tayo, magkakaroon ng iisang adhikain na tulungan ang mga kapatid nating hirap o kailangan ng tulong.</i>)	<i>Bayanihan Spirit</i>
Often times, we just smile the problem off. (<i>Kadalasang idinadaan nalang namin ang mga problema sa pag-ngiti.</i>)	<i>Humor</i>
It's just a problem. We will not be given a problem that we cannot handle. (<i>Problema lang yan, hindi tayo bibigyan ng problema na hindi natin kayang lutasin.</i>)	Rational Thinking
Instead of being sad, we keep on fighting and finding solutions for our life's comeback. (<i>Imbis na malungkot, patuloy kami na lumalaban at humahanap ng solusyon para sa muling pagbangon.</i>)	Rational Thinking

Conclusion

The study explored the perceptions, resilience and coping strategies of Filipinos in relation to disasters that frequently strike the nation such as typhoons and floods. The findings of the study provide both known and novel answers derived from group discussions. On the question of how the people perceived disasters it can be noted that two themes emerged which are the explanations that disasters are frequent life experiences and consequences of human actions. These findings on folk perceptions of disasters show that most of the respondents would rely on the historical fact that calamities are normal and a part of the Filipino experience. Aside from this, it can be noted that there is an absence of scientific opinion among the respondents and would oftentimes attribute disasters as results of subjective human frailties and wrong doings.

Furthermore, the resiliency of the people as provided by the respondents would often be faith-based and reliant on traditional support systems such as the family and the community. Filipino resiliency would also be described as founded on Filipino sense of humor and positivity towards life. The respondents believe that they have a way of dealing with problems no matter how grave those may be. Hardiness to stress is perhaps most closely affiliated to the Filipino quality of having *lakas ng loob* (inner strength) (Ignacio, 2010, pg.59). The resilience of the Filipinos is discussed by a noble literary figure, I. V. Mallari, in his essay “Pliant like a Bamboo”. Here he compares the Filipino with the bamboo plant... swaying with the wind, but standing upright soon after the wind calms down (M.M. Ramos, 2013). In this study, the Resiliency of Filipinos was manifested most especially during times of disaster. Most of the participants strongly believe that there is God that would help them recover from calamities and other misfortunes. Ignacio said that this spirituality allows their resilience to come forth in times of crises and extreme life experiences. This is also the major coping mechanism of Filipinos when they have to actively manage the distress that stretches their limits of endurance (Ignacio, 2010, pg.60).

The study anchored its description of the coping strategies on the categorization provided by the anthropologist F. Landa Jocano which are Bahala na Mentality, Humor, and Bayanihan. The categorization of Jocano is overwhelmingly supported by the responses of the participants revealing that so much has not change in the strategies employed by the people in coping with disasters. The study adapted an additional category which may have not been captured in Jocano’s list of coping strategies. The responses of the participants revealed that another theme emerged namely rational thinking or the rationalization of negative events in one’s life as something meaningful and positive. As said in one of the respondents’ statements, “It’s just a problem. We will not be given a problem that we cannot handle (*Problema lang yan, hindi tayo bibigyan ng problema na hindi natin kayang lutasin*), proves that Filipinos are found to be aware of the unproductive nature of negative thoughts, and are consciously working to maintain a more positive outlook in life despite trying circumstances.

Thus, results have shown that how Filipinos manifest their resiliency and coping strategies depends on how they perceive the aftermath or effects of a disaster.

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