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Exploring Staff Nurses' Lived Experiences of Resilience in Relation to Spirituality during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. Spirituality was reported to act as a source of resilience, particularly in stressful circumstances. As COVID-19 caused uncertainties that tested resilience, especially for those in the medical field, this study aims to explore the role of spirituality in the experience of resilience among staff nurses. Participants for this study were staff nurses in Northern Mindanao who have been working directly with COVID-19 patients and are all working in private hospitals in Cagayan de Oro City. Interviews were conducted online to gather data. For this study, interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to explore how participants make sense of their experiences of resilience. The main currency for an Interpersonal Phenomenological Analysis study is the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants. The data resulted in four core themes: (1) resilience through faith in the face of adversity, (2) spiritual relief in solitude, (3) finding peace through acceptance, and (4) compassionate service rooted in faith. The dedication of the medical front liners reflects the transformative power of faith in fostering resilience and solidarity within their spiritual communities. Their experiences emphasized the impact of spirituality in navigating challenges, cultivating resilience, and fostering solidarity amidst adversity.

Keywords: Resilience; Spirituality; COVID-19.

1.0 Introduction

Medical front liners of diagnosis, treatment, and care of patients with confirmed and suspected COVID-19 are at significant risk of both infection and development of mental health problems (Bfefferbaum & North, 2020). Its effects have had a significant impact on medical front liners' mental health and well-being. At the same time, they risk their lives, saving people who have been suspected and confirmed to have COVID-19 and causing many uncertainties that have tested their resilience. Resilience adaptively responds to a potentially highly disruptive event to preserve psychological and physical functioning and personal growth (Bonanno, 2004). It has also been defined as the capacity and dynamic process of adaptively overcoming stress and adversity while maintaining normal psychological and physical functioning (Russo et al., 2012; Rutter, 2012b). Research has highlighted the pivotal roles of religiosity and resilience in fostering wellness during pandemics (Jackson, 2021). For example, De Pinho et al. (2021) found in Portugal that healthcare and frontline workers emphasized the significant influence of religiosity on resilience, defined by Luthar and Cicchetti (2001) as the capacity to withstand adversity, adapt positively, and rebound from setbacks.

However, while previous studies have shown that religiosity can promote well-being through social support and existential certainty (Galen, 2011), spirituality offers a more intimate dimension (Cavanna et al., 2015). Defined by Puchalski et al. (2014) as a multifaceted concept encompassing philosophical, cultural, and religious beliefs and practices, spirituality fosters a sense of belongingness and existential interconnectedness that supports mental

health. Even in the study of Jones et al. (2016), spirituality was reported to positively influence one's quality of life, life satisfaction, and adjustment.

Moreover, scholars like Gray (2017) and Levin (2020) argue that spirituality acts as a source of resilience, bolstering physical, psychological, and mental well-being, particularly in stressful and traumatic circumstances (Koenig, 2020; You, 2019). Studies by Chua et al. (2019), Wild et al. (2020), and Raghavan & Sandanapitchai (2020) have also reported positive correlations between spirituality and resilience for those who suffer from physical illness, death of a loved one, artificial and natural disasters in addition to other disease outbreaks. In addition, Ahmed et al. (2021) suggested that spirituality plays an essential role in affecting the resilience of healthcare workers. Resilience acts protectively against psychological distress during unprecedented times such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Pink, 2021). Resilience enables healthcare workers to ameliorate stress, reduce their risk of burnout, and maintain well-being during challenging times (Holmes et al., 2020; West et al., 2020).

Despite this richness of evidence, few studies have investigated the roles of spirituality in the experience of resilience during pandemics, particularly within contexts where social connections are constrained, as experienced by frontline workers. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by examining the relationship between spirituality and resilience among frontline healthcare workers in Northern Mindanao, as the Department of Health revealed concerning trends in the region, with rising COVID-19 cases stretching healthcare systems to their limits. Understanding the interplay between spirituality and resilience among frontline healthcare workers is imperative.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to establish themes from the data. The main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular experiences, events, and states hold for participants. This phenomenological approach involves a detailed examination of the participant's life world. The value of qualitative research using IPA on faith, spirituality, and resilience gave the researchers a chance to glimpse into the reality of people's lives with a faith-based or spiritual practice, their difficulties, hopes, and strengths.

2.2 Research Participants

This study made use of purposive sampling to recruit the participants. The following criteria were included in selecting participants: (1) staff nurses, (2) those working in a private hospital in Northern Mindanao, and (3) those who have been working directly with COVID-19 patients. There are three participants, two of whom are COVID-19 survivors. The main concern in IPA is to appreciate each participant's account fully. For this reason, samples in IPA studies are usually small, which enables a detailed and very time-consuming case-by-case analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

2.3 Research Instrument

This study used a semi-structured questionnaire to explore the participants' thoughts, feelings, and experiences, allowing them to share their inputs freely. The researcher gathered relevant information to find meaningful results in the study, focusing on resilience among the medical frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The researcher crafted the interview guide questions and reviewed and validated them with an external validator.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Volunteer participants in this study were sent a formal invitation letter. Medical front-liners interested in the study completed a demographic questionnaire to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. They were also asked to sign an informed consent form. Upon completion, a one-on-one interview was scheduled. Interview durations varied, lasting from 30 to 45 minutes.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This research study followed ethical guidelines. The medical front liners' participation was voluntary, and they signed the informed consent form. The data collected in this study was maintained with the highest level of confidentiality. The study did not disclose participant names or personally identifying information. Additionally, the researcher was considerate of participants' time, refraining from sending emails before 8 a.m. and after 6 p.m.

to respect their schedules. After each interview, a debriefing session was conducted to address any concerns. When the study was completed and the data had been analyzed, the list linking participants' names was destroyed. The result remained utterly anonymous.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the three semi-structured interviews resulted in the emergence of four core themes. These were as follows: (1) resilience through faith in the face of adversity, (2) spiritual relief in solitude, (3) finding peace through acceptance, and (4) compassionate service rooted in faith. These themes are one possible account of the experience of resilience among medical health front liners. They do not cover all aspects of the participants' faith and spirituality but were selected due to their relevance in the experience of the staff nurses. It is acknowledged that these are subjective interpretations and that other researchers might have focused on different aspects of the accounts (Nunn, 2010).

Resilience Through Spirituality in the Face of Adversity

This theme emphasizes the central role of spirituality in fostering resilience amidst adversity. It highlights how frontline workers draw upon their spiritual convictions to navigate challenges within the hospital environment and society, ultimately strengthening their resilience and fortitude in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their disappointments in hospital provisions and societal attitudes, prayer and spiritual practices became sources of comfort and strength, enabling the medical front liners to navigate challenging circumstances with hope and purpose. As N03 shared, "*This pandemic served as a wake-up call for me as a Christian, to be closer to Him and confide in Him with what I have been going through. For guidance to be able to move forward*".

Moments of questioning God have caused more profound reflections on the nature of faith and adversity. N01 shared, "*I questioned God why it turned out like this, maybe because of too much stress. However, later, I asked for forgiveness, asking God to give me strength. He is the only one I can turn to during those times.*" The pandemic deepened their relationship with God as they sought refuge and strength. They experienced spiritual intimacy with God through prayer, meditation, and scripture reading, providing comfort and guidance in turbulent times. A similar study by Edara et al. (2021) among Taiwanese university students suggested that an individual's resiliency can be attributed to their belief in the existence of God or the Divine. Hardships served as catalysts for spiritual growth and transformation, prompting the medical front liners to reevaluate their priorities and deepen their commitment to their belief in God. Drawing strength from their spiritual practices, participants emerged from adversity with greater resilience and a renewed sense of purpose.

Spiritual Relief in Solitude

This theme emphasizes how individuals turn to their faith communities for comfort, connection, and spiritual nourishment during loneliness and uncertainty. While social isolation exacerbated feelings of loneliness and helplessness, medical front liners leaned on their faith communities for support and connection. Virtual gatherings, online prayer sessions, and spiritual discussions provided avenues for maintaining fellowship and solidarity amidst physical distancing. N03 shared, "*In our faith, we have what we call bible studies. Although it is different now that it is done online, it is important to have fellowship despite our situation still*".

This supports the findings of the study of Roberto et al. (2020), which indicated that even in the absence of physical gatherings, fostering ongoing practices that support comfort received from faith and spirituality can be helpful. Realizing the disadvantage of social isolation underscored the importance of spiritual fellowship and communal worship in sustaining one's faith during challenging times. They found creative ways to nurture their spiritual well-being and maintain belonging within their faith communities.

Finding Peace Through Acceptance

This theme highlights how medical front liners draw strength from their faith to surrender to divine providence, cultivating resilience and peace amidst the challenges of the pandemic. Acceptance of the current situation was through faith, as they recognized the sovereignty of God amidst the pandemic. N02 shared, "*But then, there is a realization in the pandemic. You are reminded of what God has done for you and that you should be thankful. During this pandemic, you were not left by God and have been provided the necessary things to survive. Some people do not realize that.*"

Trusting in divine providence and acknowledging a higher purpose in their experiences enabled them to find peace and resilience amidst uncertainty. N01 shared, "*The pandemic made me closer to God. I started reading the Bible and turned back to my faith in Him. It seems like there is an advantage in the pandemic because you become closer to your family. It made me appreciate God even more*". Understanding the positive side of the pandemic reflected their gratitude and faith in God's provision. Also, recognizing blessings amidst hardships fostered a sense of spiritual resilience and optimism, empowering medical front liners to face challenges with renewed faith and courage.

Compassionate Service Rooted in Faith

This theme underscores how frontline workers' commitment to prioritizing the health of others is grounded in their faith values of compassion and service, fostering resilience and solidarity within their spiritual communities. Their commitment to prioritizing the health of patients and the safety of loved ones was rooted in their faith values of compassion and service. N02 shared, "*Spirituality will always play an important role because, in everything we do, we always associate it with God.*"

N03 shared, "*We always care and help our patients no matter what happens. This is our calling, and this is our job. We help the sick. We care for the sick.*" Guided by their spiritual beliefs, they embraced their frontline roles with dedication and selflessness, embodying the principles of love and care in their caregiving. Spiritual communities also provided support and encouragement, fostering a sense of solidarity and shared purpose in serving others. They found strength and resilience in their journey through prayer and mutual support.

The study reveals that spirituality is critical in fostering resilience among medical front liners during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar to findings by Bfefferbaum & North (2020) and Jackson (2021), the participants drew on their spiritual beliefs to navigate the challenges posed by the pandemic. This spiritual engagement provided comfort, direction, and a sense of purpose, echoing Koenig's (2020) assertion that spirituality enhances psychological well-being in stressful circumstances. The deepened faith observed among participants aligns with Edara et al. (2021), highlighting that resilience is strengthened through spiritual practices.

Medical frontliners found comfort and connection within their faith communities. Virtual gatherings and online prayer sessions became crucial for maintaining fellowship and solidarity, supporting Roberto et al. (2020) findings on the importance of ongoing spiritual practices. This adaptive behavior demonstrates the capacity of spirituality to foster resilience by providing a sense of community and support during challenging times, aligning with Luthar and Cicchetti (2001).

Also, medical front liners drew strength from their faith to accept the pandemic's challenges, finding peace and resilience through trust in divine providence. This finding reflects Galen's (2011) and Puchalski et al. (2014) findings on spirituality's role in providing existential certainty and a sense of belonging. Recognizing blessings amidst hardships fostered optimism and resilience, echoing You (2019) and Holmes et al. (2020). Healthcare workers' commitment to compassionate service was deeply rooted in their spiritual values, aligning with Chua et al. (2019) and Wild et al. (2020). Support from spiritual communities reinforced their resilience and dedication, illustrating the protective role of spirituality in facing adversity, as Ahmed et al. (2021) noted.

In the Filipino context, spirituality and religious practices are integral to daily life and well-being. The predominantly Catholic faith emphasizes community, compassion, and resilience, evident in the participants' experiences. The concept of "Bayanihan" (community spirit) and the strong family ties prevalent in Filipino culture further support the resilience observed among healthcare workers. This cultural inclination towards communal support and spiritual reliance aligns with the study's findings, demonstrating how deeply embedded spiritual and cultural values bolster resilience and well-being. In any collectivistic culture, the person is interdependent with others (Shiraev & Levy, 2001). In the case of Filipinos, they see themselves as being connected with other people and social institutions. This is evident in the participants helping and caring for others amidst hardships.

For many Filipinos, a relationship with God is of primary value (Yalung, 2010). It guides their evaluations of their behavior and search for meaning in life. Learning from the Filipino context, where many hold religion as necessary, we are not surprised to see that spirituality is a relationship with God built upon one's understanding of God as a powerful source of resilience.

4.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, the core themes highlight the role of faith and spirituality in the experience of resilience among medical front liners in the face of adversity during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite encountering disappointments in hospital provisions and societal attitudes, these individuals turned to their faith as a source of strength and fortitude. Through prayer, spiritual practices, and introspection, they found relief and guidance in their relationship with God, deepening their spiritual intimacy and resilience amidst turbulent times.

Moreover, spiritual relief in solitude highlights the importance of faith communities in providing comfort and connection during periods of social isolation. Virtual gatherings and online platforms became crucial avenues for maintaining fellowship and sustaining spiritual well-being, demonstrating the resilience of faith communities in fostering solidarity amidst physical distancing. Furthermore, finding peace through acceptance illustrates how frontline workers draw strength from their faith to surrender to divine providence, cultivating resilience and peace amidst uncertainty. By trusting in God's sovereignty and recognizing blessings amidst hardships, they embraced acceptance as a pathway to spiritual resilience and optimism.

Lastly, compassionate service rooted in faith emphasizes the integral role of faith values in guiding medical front liners' commitment to prioritizing the health and well-being of others. Grounded in principles of compassion and service, their dedication to caregiving reflects the transformative power of faith in fostering resilience and solidarity within their spiritual communities. In essence, the experiences of medical front liners emphasized the impact of faith and spirituality in navigating challenges, cultivating resilience, and fostering solidarity amidst adversity. Through their unwavering faith and commitment to compassionate service, they embody the resilience of the human spirit in times of crisis.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm their contributions to the paper: Mahinay, CD—study conception, data collection, analysis and interpretation of the result, and draft manuscript preparation. Manaois, J—editing, writing, and supervising. Wapano, MR—initial conceptualization, research direction, and editing.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest with the publication of this paper.

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