

THE EXPERIENCES AND SEARCH FOR MEANING IN A POVERTY-STRICKEN COMMUNITY IN CAVITE: BASIS FOR A LIFE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM

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Abstract

The study describes the different ordeals being experienced by ten individuals from the same “walk of life” due to extreme poverty. The criterion for choosing the respondents was based on description of poverty as material deprivation. In order to determine the poorest families living the area, a survey on socio-economic status was administered among residents of Barangay 10-B Kingfisher, Bacoor Bay Sta. Cruz, Cavite City. The result of the survey became the basis for choosing the ten co-researchers. This study employed the qualitative-phenomenological research design, which centered on the combination of existential and transcendental phenomenology, where both the lived experience and meaning of the experience are interchangeably observed, described and analyzed. Through both empirical and reflective methods, it probed into disclosing the lived experience of the ten samples of the household population suffering from extreme poverty.

INTRODUCTION

Suffering is a universal fact of life. It follows existence as death follows birth, as night follows day. Humans are not the only creatures who suffer, for every creature that lives on the face of this planet either preys on other creatures or is itself being preyed upon. The eternal battle for survival is what creates suffering, uncertainty and impermanence in this world.

Endowed with highly developed mental facility, humans have gained dominion over the fate of earth. Still, mankind is bound to the natural laws. In an attempt to explain, alleviate, and override the natural repercussions and problems brought about by his existence; man

resorted to religion, philosophy and science. Different religions and schools of thought offer vast explanations and remedies to the plight and sufferings of man; and they, scientific or otherwise, follow the same procedure. First, "suffering" has to be defined; second, it has to be explained; and only after satisfying the first two will it be resolved.

It is interesting to note that among all the creatures in this planet, only man is capable of truly interpreting and giving depth to the suffering he experiences since he is the only creature capable of moral reasoning. Animals or lower forms of life may see suffering not as humans do; but rather as an inescapable aspect of life upon which nature maintains its delicate balance. For thinkers like Buddha, being able to accept this simple fact is the way man could end his self-imposed suffering.

Man's rapid development in terms of technology, knowledge, politics and other aspects of civilization has brought upon great suffering not only to himself but to his environment as well. The wars that brought the most number of casualties were fought only in the twentieth century. Likewise, the environment had never been this deteriorated or depleted in the past as it is today: and this is due to man's own handiwork. Man has totally altered the quality of his life not for the better but for the worst. In their futile search for meaning in their lives many committed suicide; others have resorted to unending quests for more and more material pleasures.

As a result of the outcry from suffering in the last century, organized bodies of knowledge derived from experimentation and observation were employed. This was in the hope of finding cures for the incrementing amount of suffering man is coping with, that is, in direct proportion to his progress.

One of the most remarkable modern schools of thought dedicated to finding ways to alleviate human suffering is the Third Viennese School of Psychiatry known as "*logotherapy*", which was founded by Dr. Viktor Frankl. In the book "*Man's Search for Meaning*", Dr. Frankl (1963) described his, and millions of Jews' daily struggle for existence in the hands of Adolf Hitler and his cohorts. The very grim condition of life at concentration camps during the Holocaust became the fertile ground where Dr. Frankl's greatest contribution to the field of psychotherapy sprouted.

Logotherapy is a mixture of existential philosophy and psychoanalysis. Its basic tenet could be summarized in the words of German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche as "*He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how*" (Frankl, 1963, p.224). Logotherapy application is very individual-centered and could be used without any cultural bias. It denotes that the individual is the one ultimately responsible for the outcome of his life. It would wholly depend on him whether to treat suffering as a curse or as an opportunity. Frankl states that man has both potentialities within himself. This is actualized on decisions and not on conditions.

Realizing this scenario, this paper was conceptualized to, first, describe how "typical" Filipinos react and deal with sufferings; and second, and more importantly, to extract meaning from these experiences. And since subjects in this study were limited only to those who suffer because of extreme poverty, it became the most ardent goal of the author to (1.) learn how the subjects (or in phenomenology parlance, *co-researchers*) survive, on a daily basis, the grim reality of extreme poverty; and, (2.) help others who share the same fate, not only survive, but transcend through the experience.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The study described the different ordeals being experienced by ten individuals from the same "walks of life" due to suffering from extreme poverty. Specifically, it answers the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of poverty according to the co-researchers?
2. How do the co-researchers find meaning facilitated by their coping strategies?
3. Based on the findings, what life enhancement program would be applicable to the co-researchers' situation or condition?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized the qualitative-phenomenological research design. It centered particularly on the combination of existential and transcendental phenomenology where both the lived experience and

meaning of the experience are interchangeably observed, described and analyzed. Through both empirical and reflective methods, it probes into disclosing the lived experience of the ten co-researchers suffering from extreme poverty.

Participants of the Study

This study used purposive sampling technique in selecting the co-researchers. Patton (1990) believes that purposive sampling is popular in qualitative research due to the logic and power that lies in finding “information rich” cases for study in depth. These are cases from which one can learn a great deal about the things that matter most in a certain phenomenon. Purposive sampling targets a particular group of people. When the desired population for the study is rare or very difficult to locate and recruit for a study, purposive sampling may be the only option (Thomson, 2005). In this study, the criterion in choosing the co-researchers was based on the socio-economic survey. The survey was administered to the residents of Barangay 10-B Kingfisher, Bacoor Sta.Cruz, Cavite City. After getting and analyzing all the data from the survey, the top ten poorest families were drafted as the co-researchers of the study.

Research Instrument

For the instrument of the study, an Interview Guide Questionnaire and an immersion technique with the co-researchers through naturalistic observation were used. Before the interviews were conducted, Purpose in Life Tests, were administered to provide a glimpse or a sketch of the ten co-researchers’ purpose in their lives. However, the tests did not have any bearing on the major findings of the study so as not to influence the phenomenological interpretation of the experiences.

Data Analysis

Using the principles of phenomenological inquiry (Manen, 2002) with focus on both transcendental and existential orientations, the study distilled meaning from the lived experiences of the co-researchers. Specifically, for the purpose of the study to be achieved, the procedures of two schools of thought of the phenomenological inquiry were employed: the empirical and reflective methods.

The ten co-researchers were observed and interviewed in their respective homes (or in their natural environment) from March 2008 to June 2008. They were observed meticulously by noting every detail of the events or the cause that may occur prior, during and after the interview proper.

Data were collected through naturalistic observation and interactive interviews, which were recorded using a digital audio recorder, with the co-researchers. An interview guide was used to direct the flow of conversations. Analysis started when the first data were collected. This analysis was utilized in formulating decisions related to further data collection.

Through these techniques, the researcher was able to observe and determine how the ten co-researchers find meaning and deal with their sufferings and find meaning in their existence.

After gathering all the data through observations and interactive interviews, phenomenological reflection method, specifically, macro-thematic reflection was used to explain the meaning of the lived experience of the co-researchers. The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to grasp the meaning of something. Manen (2002) states that phenomenological reflection is both easy and difficult. It is easy because it perceives the meaning of human experiences, which is something everyone does constantly. What is difficult is to arrive at a reflective determination and explication of what “something” is.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Empirical Findings

Problem No. 1 What are the experiences of poverty according to the co-researchers?

Based on the data or stories presented in this study, the co-researcher's experiences of poverty are as follows:

1. Fear of eviction.
2. Scarcity of food.
3. Health problems.
4. Lack of educational opportunities for their children.
5. Underemployment and unemployment.

Problem No. 2 How do the co-researchers find meaning facilitated by their coping strategies?

Based on the analysis of the data, the study uncovered the following facts regarding the coping mechanisms employed by the co-researchers in order to survive from extreme poverty. These can be categorized as follows:

A. Income Generation

1. Accepting any jobs, even those, which are low paying and hazardous like buy and sell of plastic bottles and sewage cleaning.
2. Working primarily in manual labor like laundry, garbage collecting, bus dispatching, water delivery (pag-iigib), jeepney/pedicab driving.
3. Engaging in low capital and cottage-based businesses like sari-sari store, rag making and confection making; their children help in selling the products by peddling in streets.

B. Domestic Management

1. Skipping meals to economize
2. Not using electrical appliances
3. Limiting the choices of food the point that sometimes all they eat is rice, or none at all.
4. Asking food from relatives and neighbors.
5. Borrowing from loan sharks even at high interest rates.

C. Emotional/Psychological Coping

1. Optimism. Believing that their lives are going to change for the better.
2. Prayer: Faith in God.
3. Holding on to each other: believing that they are not alone in their suffering. They have God and their families.

Problem No. 3 Based on the findings, what life enhancement program would be applicable to the co-researchers' situation or condition?

Based on the analysis of data, it is evident that the Life Enhancement Program designed for the co-researchers should focus on two aspects: the intrapersonal dimensions of the co-researchers' life and income generation. The researcher has mentioned earlier in her previous discussions that one of the major objectives of this study is to help the co-researchers find acceptance of their situation, which, later would pave the way for finding a purpose or *meaning*. She could assume that not all the co-researchers were able to derive meaning out of their experiences. This is grounded on the analyses of their statements during the interview and transcription. These observations and statements, on the other hand, are supported by the result of the Purpose in Life Test, which the researcher administered with the said co-researchers prior to the interviews. Hence, emphasis should be applied in making sure that participants should learn first to accept their experiences.

It is also important to take note of the concepts that surfaced from the researchers reflections - a belief that when one finds acceptance he will have meaning and in having meaning, there is hope. The concepts of acceptance, meaning and hope are the underpinnings of the intra-personal improvement program. Like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that fit perfectly, livelihood development should compliment intra-personal development.

Reflective Findings

Reflection on a Person's Acceptance of an Experience

*"Blessed is he who does not expect,
for he shall never be disappointed" - anonymous*

The researcher found the quote above while searching the World Wide Web for some references regarding this study. Finding it humorous, witty and *pertinent*, the researcher took note of it, and reflected on its message. Some readers may find the saying cynical,

for it negates the idea of *hope*. As much as possible, the researcher wants to avoid discussing philosophy and logic but *expecting* and *hoping* are two different words. They may be used interchangeably, but they are not totally synonymous.

The above quote suddenly sprang out of the researcher's mind while she was contemplating on the concept of *acceptance*. Using existential and Buddhist tautologies, the researcher related this word with the words *expectation* and *hope*, and was able to coin her own "axiom".

*"The one who expects does not find acceptance,
but the one who finds acceptance also finds hope"*

Not wanting to delve so much on concocting a textual definition for the word *acceptance*, for it has a far deeper meaning than what dictionaries could provide, the co-researchers were not asked for the definition of the word. In this study, the meatier question that needs to be answered would be, "*How could you tell if you have already found acceptance?*"

One of the major objectives of this study is to help the co-researchers find acceptance of their situation, which, subsequently, would be the crux for finding a *meaning*. For this reason, a short discussion of logotherapy was provided on earlier chapters. However, it would be easier for researchers to first determine or gauge who actually needs help. Asking the question "How could you tell if you have already found acceptance?" directly would not help. A person can actually say one thing, but has something different in mind. It is also possible that a person is aware of a concept, such as a piece of wisdom but fail in its application. Smokers, for example, are aware of the ill-effects of smoking but could not avoid the habit. Relating it to this study, co-researchers may say they have accepted their situation, yet their nonverbal cues tell one otherwise. Hence, a more subtle approach needs to be employed.

When the researcher was conducting this research, she observed the lifestyles, coping patterns and mindsets, not only of the co-researchers, but also of the other residents of Barangay 10-B Kingfisher. Besides conducting ocular or visual observation of the environment, gestures, expressions and physical appearances of the persons involved, the researcher also tried to "read between the lines".

She recorded and took note of their voices, how they delivered their answers, and how consistent they were with their convictions.

According to studies, women are emotionally stronger than men. The researcher is not sure if it will holds true to the co-researchers. The ten co-researchers in this study comprised of three men and seven women. The male co-researchers showed more depth and wisdom as shown by how they gave their answers. Their thoughts were clear and unbridled. This was evident in the tone of their voices and the consistency of their thoughts. On the other hand, the female co-researchers are more pre-occupied with maintaining the household and providing for their family. Because of this and other practical issues, they are more concerned with *escaping and surviving* from their situation rather than *accepting or embracing* it. The problem with the males, however, is that they seem to be *too contented* with their situation that sometimes they refuse to exert extra effort or even lift a finger. While the tension field with the female co-researchers is high, with the men, it is like a sleeping log. Although, this is not a comparison between the male and female psyche, the researcher believes that knowing the difference between the two genders is essential in the development of the life enhancement program.

While conducting the interviews, the researcher took special notice on how the co-researchers narrated their life stories. For this reflection, the researcher took interest on one of the co-researchers: Mang Cesar.

Mang Cesar, the first person interviewed, is a 77-year old widower. The researcher referred to him as the "Adventurer". Mang Cesar is living with his daughter Teresita and one or two of his grandchildren in a very small partition in one of the "apartment" units in their area. There was virtually nothing in his pad, except for a few essentials like articles of clothing, a few kitchen utensils, a *thermos* bottle and an improvised kerosene lamp.

At the start of the interview, Mang Cesar was quick to blurt that he is Cesar Ramirez. The researcher was puzzled with his joke, so she just smiled and mused how it would be possible since his last name is Carin. The researcher's husband then told her that Cesar Ramirez was an actor in the 50's. Mang Cesar was trying his best to make the researcher feel comfortable. Perhaps he noticed that she was starting to get fidgety because they were being surrounded by a gang of children with chicken pox.

The researcher found it entertaining that at his age, Mang Cesar still loves to crack jokes. When she asked him where his wife is, he told her “*gumarahe na*”: such an unusual euphemism for “dead”. There was really nothing unique or special with his narrative. His was not an awe-inspiring rags-to-riches story like that of Andrew Carnegie or, here in the Philippines, Manny Villar, Lucio Tan, John Gokongwei, Henry Sy and other business tycoons. Mang Cesar told the researcher that he had worked hard all his life, to the point of working like a beast of burden. What particularly struck the researcher was his *enthusiasm* in narrating his story. It may no longer show in his voice because of his age; but she managed to discern serenity, and at the same time, vigor on his gentle face as he recounted his tales. Retelling a bad experience, no matter how liberating, can still be traumatic. Mang Cesar seems to be enjoying it. To make the point a little “visual”, consider the following particular situation. If for example, a situation requires someone to share his experience as a World War II veteran during the Bataan Death March; some people would narrate it like this:

“It was the worst chapter of my life. Every time I think about it, it brings back disturbing memories: as if I’m still experiencing the pain. I can still see the look on my comrades’ faces as they were impaled with those Japanese soldiers’ bayonets. (crying) I don’t think I can continue. I’m sorry. I just don’t know how I could have survived it.”

With Cesar narrating the same incident, the researcher assumes it would probably sound like this:

“That Bataan Death March is really something! Imagine, we walked from Bataan to Capaz, Tarlac without food, water, everything! I don’t know how I could have survived, but I did. A small voice inside me is telling me, “Cesar, keep the faith. You are going to live”. All of a sudden, I found a way to escape without being noticed. Whew, What an experience! Bad weeds die hard! (laugh)”

The researcher would just like to illustrate that Mang Cesar shares his experiences with pride, no matter how depressing they are. This is not bravado, but more of an affirmation that that he is a

survivor: that no matter how powerful life's storms are, in the end he will be still be alive and kicking...and grinning.

The encounter with Mang Cesar provided the researcher an insight in one of the dimensions or requisites of acceptance. Acceptance depends on the *perception* of the experience. There is really no such thing as a good or bad experience; they are perfectly equal. Man is the one who labels the experience as either "good" or "bad". Hence, experiences are subjective. You see things, the way you choose to see them. For Mang Cesar, all experiences are good. They are just part of the whole "novel".

The researcher has listened to the recording of the interview and read the transcriptions, several times; and noticed that Mang Cesar does not have any "wishes". When she asked him if he has any aspirations, he answered:

"Oo...kaya ayan iniisip ko na lang bahala na Panginoong Diyos kako..Basta ako nanalangin sa kanya, mabuhay ako o mamatay, basta."; *"Wala akong aalahanin sa buhay ko. Dahil maingat talaga ako sa buhay ko. Kung ako'y abusado, panahon pa ng Hapon wala na siguro ako."*

Relating this to the tenet that the researcher has come up regarding acceptance, expectation and hope; true acceptance does not come packaged with wishes or expectations. Man should just work and do his "thing". Whatever the outcome will be, then so be it. Mang Cesar epitomized this. He worked so hard for a time and still ended up poor. But, he did not complain about this misfortune; nor, aired any frustrations that he should have been well-off by now because he was never lazy. The researcher couldn't even recall him citing any significant event in his life that caused the poverty he is experiencing right now. Mang Cesar said he is just surrendering everything to God ...

"iniisip ko na lang bahala na Panginoong Diyos kako".

Now, this brings us back to the saying "*Blessed is he who does not expect for he shall never be disappointed*". Mang Cesar was never disappointed with life since he didn't have any expectations. With this, the researcher can conclude that he has learned to accept his

fate. We may ask “where does *hope* come in?” Mang Cesar found acceptance and with it, surrendered himself to God’s will. Because of this, he is *confident* that God will *always* provide his needs, and not allow any harm to come his way. Now, *that* is hope. Mang Cesar is telling the truth; and not something that is contrary to what he actually thinks or feels. This is felt from an aura of peace and calm disposition that he exuded.

The following quote in the Bible applies to Mang Cesar’s experience, St. Paul’s words on Timothy 4:6-7:

“As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God.

The time of my death is near.

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race, and I have remained faithful”.

The researcher ends this reflection with a quote from Confucius:

“Everything has its beauty but not everyone sees it”

Reflection on Hope and Emotional Coping “Mechanisms” against Poverty

“Let me not pray to be sheltered from dangers,

But be fearless in facing them.

Let me not beg for the stilling of my pain,

But for the heart to conquer it.

Let me not crave in anxious fear to be saved,

But hope for the patience to win my freedom.” -Rabindranath Tagore

Recent news regarding increasing poverty related incidents in this country are disturbing. This is not referring to poverty related crimes, *per se*, like theft and the like. Crimes like these are but a desperate man’s way of coping with poverty. We have heard of sayings like “desperate times, call for desperate measures” or “The end justifies the means”. The second saying is the dogma and summary of the Machiavellian philosophy proposed by Niccolo Machiavelli in his political science classic “The Prince”. Machiavelli demonstrated that the purpose or *end* will always be “good”; no matter how contemptible the method by which that purpose is accomplished. One must remember however, that there will always be someone who will *benefit*,

and someone who will be at the losing end. A classic example is that of a poor man who is forced to commit robbery because his child is in the hospital. The act is evil, but the purpose is not. Another example would be the self-serving and egocentric crimes like corruption among government officials. The act itself is evil but the benefit the act will bring to the perpetrator is definitely "good". What is disturbing is the loss of hope brought about by poverty and the incidents of suicide, which are alarmingly increasing.

Losing hope, probably, is the worst sin one can commit. The Bible says that it is one of the sins against the Holy Spirit and there is no forgiveness for such sins. When a person commits a crime or an offense, he still has a chance to be forgiven by the aggrieved party. He will just need to pay for his crime, and soon he will be forgiven, no matter how serious the offense is. But if a person loses hope and commits suicide, he forfeits all his chances to be forgiven.

The researcher has read in the news the story of a girl, probably in her freshman high school years, who committed suicide because, according to the suicide note, she can no longer bear the poverty her family is experiencing. (Police however, still are investigating whether the girl actually committed suicide or was murdered.) There was an outpouring of public sympathy. Even President Gloria Arroyo visited the girl's family in Iloilo and provided cash for the parents and scholarship grants for her remaining siblings; while government critics took advantage of the situation and lambasted the administration for the lack of effective programs for the poor. If the girl actually did commit suicide because of poverty (without any other reason), one could say that her mind has been poisoned at such an early age. She could have had a bright future ahead for she was smart (She was a class valedictorian). But everything for her is over now.

Poverty can either make or break a person. It can push him down to the deepest abyss of obscurity, or up to the zenith of greatness. But, it ultimately depends on the one experiencing the phenomenon to perceive poverty either as an opportunity or a threat.

To have hope amidst strife can be compared to a candle lit in a very dark room. The room is too big and too dark that the candle fails to illuminate its surroundings. The light is being eaten by darkness, and the only light left is the one coming from the candle itself. Suppose one needs to get out of the room and the candle is placed very near

the exit. (Do you think you would be able to get out?) As the person attempts to get out, chances are he would fumble as he gropes in the darkness. Yet he is *confident* that he will be able to get out. He just needs to go to the direction where the light is coming from. That confidence is *hope*. Another thing shown in the example is the *attempt* to get out, meaning, there is *action*. There is action despite obstacles. One could not say then that a person has hope if he is not doing anything about his situation.

Like the candle in the example above, there are “tools” that man uses to kindle hope. Another example is that of a man likened to a lamp. To light it up, something is needed to create a spark. Once lit, it would give off light. But the questions that will remain are: (1) how bright is the light going to be? (2) How long is this light going to shine? All of these depend on the makeup of the lamp (man) *itself*.

Relating this concept to the study, there are “tools” used by the co-researchers to foster hope and keep them striving. Two of the most common are: (1) faith in God; (2) their children. As the researcher observed, the only thing that probably prevents mankind from totally destroying itself is its faith and reverential fear of a Supreme Being. Man ascribes his capacity to escape a very tight situation to his faith in God. Yet there are also times when man can beat insurmountable odds because of *love*. This could either be love for a spouse, a child or just about anyone else he deems precious.

Among the ten co-researchers, one of the most profound statements heard was from Bert:

“...Ah syempre ang Diyos ah... Siya yung sumusuporta pa rin sa akin eh. Siya ang nagbibigay ng pag-asaya kasi may dalangin din ako sa kanya na, huwag mong pababayaan. Huwag n'ya naman sana akong papabayaan. ...Na hindi magkasakit. Ayun bale. Siya na rin ang nagbibigay ng lakas ng loob.”; “Ah siyempre yungabilidad mo at tiyaga. Huwag ka lang mawawalan ng pag-asaya. Nakakarecover din naman, basta't tatag lang ng pananampalataya, yun lang.”

In this statement, Bert acknowledges that it is God who gives meaning to his life. He asks God to always look after him, yet is aware that he needs to do something from his end. Lastly, he is *confident* that he will overcome his trials . . .

“...Nakaka-recover din naman, basta’t tatag lang ng pananampalataya...”.

This can be considered a “declaration of hope”. If on the previous reflection, the researcher stated feeeling an air of tranquility and peace with Mang Cesar; with Bert, it is a “*chi*” of quiet assurance. Bert and his wife Beth do not possess any material “diversions”. They do not have a TV set, mobile phones, or even a transistor radio. All they have is each other and their children. Yet both of them happily carry out their responsibilities to each other and their children. Bert drives a public utility jeepney, while Beth helps him by driving a pedicab and delivering water. Their eldest child helps by looking after her smaller siblings. The family is happier when they are together. In his prayers, the only thing Bert always asks from God is to deliver his family from illnesses and maintain solidarity or unity...

“Basta ang dalangin ko lang wag lang magkaroon ng sakit at saka, yun, may pagkakaisa kami...nagtutulungan.”.

He does not even expect his children to look after him and his wife in their old age. I assume that is what we can call faith, or hope, or whatever we wish to call it. To wrap it up, Bert’s viewpoints can be best expressed in the Filipino proverb “*Nasa Diyos ang awa, nasa tao ang gawa*”.

Jocelyn, who is also one of the co-researchers, also expresses faith in God. However, the researcher does not quite agree with her belief that God will not give her a trial that she would not be able to overcome...

“...sabi ko nga sa sarili ko, yun ang pinagkaloob sa kin ng Diyos. Alam nyang kaya ko. Kaya...kaya ko Ma’am”; “...Siguro naman alam ng Diyos. Talagang hindi kami pinababayaan. Kasi talagang hindi naman kami umaano.”.

A little later during the interview she stated:

“Minsan, sinisisi ko yung sarili ko, bakit ako ganito? Mula dalaga ako hanggang ngayong may asawa ako, hirap pa din. Sabi ko, siguro ito ang pinagkaloob sa kin ng Diyos, wala kang magagawa.”

The researcher believes that God does not test man; but he has the power to intervene when the situation is already beyond control. God just *allows* a situation to take place; he does *give* it as a test or a trial.

Jocelyn is a fine example of someone who finds “hope” because of love for her children...

“...minsan nawawalan ako ng pag-asa, umaano ako, Kaya lang inaano ko, iniisip ko ang mga anak ko Ma’am. Pag ako bumigay, wala na. Ang asawa ko rin ang kawawa. Basta, ang hinihiling ko lang sa kanya, huwag nya ako bigyan ng sakit, kaming dalawa, dahil ang mga anak namin ang kawawa. Kalitian pa.”; “Habang may buhay may pag-asa. Ako, hindi talaga Ma’am nawawalan ng pag-asa...Sabi ko, kung hindi man ako makaranas ng kaginhawaan, siguro naman pag malalaki na ang mga anak ko, dun ako makakaranas ng kaginhawaan siguro. Baka ang mga anak ko ang mag-ano sa akin, Pinag-sisikapan ko din silang makapag-alaral ng maayos, para kahit papaano d’yan din ang pag-asa ko sa kanila”.

Jocelyn had an unhappy childhood. She would like to rectify this by doing everything to see to it that she could provide her children a good future. Apparently, she does not want her children to undergo the same experiences. This is not what the researcher could call “absolute” hope. She *expects* her children to “repay” her (by taking care of her) if they are going to be successful in life. The researcher wanted to know how Jocelyn would react if things turn out totally in contrary to what she had expected. What if her son becomes a drug addict or her daughter marries at the age of 14. The researcher did not have the strength to ask her those questions during the interview because, the researcher figured, we would only know the *true* reaction of the person if the actual situation is already at hand. For now, the researcher would like to refrain from making any conclusions on that since she wishes her co-researchers all the best in life.

I find the works of the Indian intellectual giant, Rabindranath Tagore to be full of depth and wisdom. In his poem near the heading of this reflection, he stressed the importance of facing one’s trials.

Some people, however, do not have the strength to face their trials; hence, they resort to “escapisms”. The worst form of escapism is to lose hope and take away one’s life. For the researcher, it is the most horrible act of cowardice one can commit. The Japanese practice of *Seppuku* or *Hara-kiri*, of course, is a different story. Warriors who lose battles or leaders who commit undignified acts commit suicide by slashing their abdomens with Katana blades. This, for the Japanese, is not an act of cowardice but a way to preserve their dignity. This is still a form of escapism.

Unfortunately, in one or more occasions in life, all of us resort to escapisms in the form of emotional coping “mechanisms”. We may suppress or repress our emotions or cover up through lying or hypocrisy. The problem however lies with the fact that we would not be able to overcome our trials or solve our problems if we continually and habitually use these “tools”. We need to confront our trials and make concrete actions. Can we slay a dragon with a wooden sword? But I understand, and it is but natural, that we all have this tendency to look for diversions at times. In wars for example, the casualties, normally, are those who are in the frontline. The soldiers who hide from the line of fire are the ones who survive. But the bottom line is: wars are not going to be won if all soldiers are hiding, and are afraid to engage.

One of the emotional coping mechanisms commonly used is the “roller coaster ride”. This approach is the avoidance that most of us undertake. We wish to ignore the present problem and allow others to see the happiness in us. Let us take for example the statement of one of the co-researchers, Mang Eddie:

“Kung maibabalik yung dati, gusto kong ibalik yung dati, yung una kong hinarap. Kaya lang eh nakalipas na yun eh. Hindi na maibabalik yun eh. Mahirap ng bumalik sa dati eh. Kaya ganito sikap na lang kung meron; kung wala ayos lang”..

Let me focus on the last part “*kaya ganito sikap na lang kung meron, kung wala, ayos lang*”. This statement implies denial of the reality that he is in. It gives the impression of satisfaction of what life might bring and the happiness of being in this condition, but deep within his experience of life is bitterness. Mang Eddie wished that if he could only turn back the hands of time, he would not commit the

same mistake again. He might say all the positive things about being contented, and how he accepts his situation, but the pain of being deceived and rejected continues to affect his whole being. Of course, this is just the researcher's opinion. Her intention when she wrote the stories of the co-researchers was to present it the way *they want it to be presented*. In doing so, the researcher detached her personal biases and, as much as possible, faithfully recollected how they answered the questions and presented their life stories as martyrs or heroes.

To end this reflection, the researcher once again quotes one of St. Paul's dictums which can be found in Hebrews 11:1:

*"What is faith?
It is the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen.
It is the evidence of thing we cannot see."*

Eidetic Symbol

Based on the analysis and reflections made during the course of the study, poverty is symbolized as, or compared to, "a pair of eyeglasses". Suppose the eyeglasses are not graded. If you ask a person with myopia to wear it, his vision would still be blurred. On the other hand, there would not be any difference if the wearer has normal vision. Poverty, for the researcher is like the eyeglasses. It has a neutral value. It will really depend on the one experiencing that phenomenon; whether he overcomes it, or be overwhelmed. What the person is experiencing should not be blamed on the phenomenon, for again, it has neutral value. What should be examined is the intrinsic condition of the experiencer. If the myopic person undergoes a corrective surgery and restores his vision, he is going to see clearly whether or not he wears the eyeglasses.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, using phenomenological approach in uncovering ambiguous and underlying concepts, is highly relevant in fields like anthropology, sociology, philosophy and

psychology. As with clinical medicine, once a condition is properly assessed and diagnosed, treatment could easily be implemented.

In situations like those of the co-researchers, since the problem has already been determined and addressed by studies like this, the personnel (e.g. counselors, psychologists) can use the therapy technique of their choice. They can use for example, techniques lifted from logotherapy like “Paradoxical Intention” (Frankl, p. 196), wherein, in the course of the therapy or counseling the patient is required to confront the very thing that causes the trauma or disturbance.

For the study’s sociological benefit, the Life Enhancement Program included can be a paradigm in designing and implementing community development programs.

This study, or any study that seeks to uncover meanings in life experiences, may be too idealistic for some. This study however was written with sincerest effort to help the poor to have greater understanding and knowledge of their situation, and ultimately themselves for knowledge of one’s inner self may be the key to healing. Healing leads to improvement. Improvement leads to success. Success leads to happiness. Socrates once said “Know Thyself”. Jesus Christ, in Matthew 23:26 declared”...“First wash the inside of the cup, and the outside will be clean, too”. The stress on the importance of having knowledge of one’s self is as old as civilization itself; it just needs to be rediscovered time and again.

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