

Life During the COVID-19 Pandemic of the Poorest Families in a Philippine Municipality

Buhay sa Panahon ng COVID-19 Pandemic ng Mga Pinakamahirap na Pamilya sa isang Munisipyo ng Pilipinas

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected various sectors of society and people of all socioeconomic backgrounds, and each either faces economic, social, or psychological challenges. However, it is interesting to examine how the poorest of the poor families who faced limitations in their socioeconomic conditions lived and were affected during the pandemic. By employing the descriptive phenomenological inquiry, this study aimed to explore and describe the meaning of the experiences of the Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program (4P's) beneficiaries, particularly the 4P's level 1 families in Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental, Philippines amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Six participants were purposively chosen for the study. The semi-structured interview was guided by the central question: what is the meaning of your situation now living with the COVID-19 pandemic? The findings of the study revealed five central themes which represented the participants' experiences amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, namely, socioeconomic limitations and struggles, acceptance of the existing condition, interdependence within social networks, fear and disbelief over the disease, and optimistic outlook on their condition.

Keywords: Poorest families; COVID-19; poverty; phenomenology; Philippines

ABSTRAK

Ang pandemya ng COVID-19 ay nakaapekto sa iba't ibang sektor ng lipunan at mga tao ng lahat ng sosyo-ekonomikong kalagayan, at ang bawat isa ay nahaharap sa mga hamon sa ekonomiya, panlipunan, o sikolohikal. Gayunpaman, kagiliw-giliw na suriin kung paano nabuhay at naapektuhan ang pinakamahihirap sa mga mahihirap na pamilya na nahaharap sa mga limitasyon sa kanilang sosyo-ekonomikong na kondisyon sa panahon ng pandemya. Sa pamamagitan ng paggamit ng descriptive phenomenological inquiry, ang pag-aaral na ito ay naglalayong tuklasin at ilarawan ang kahulugan ng mga karanasan ng mga benepisyaryo ng Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program (4P's), partikular na ang 4P's level 1 na pamilya sa Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental, Pilipinas sa gitna ng pandemya ng COVID-19. Anim na kalahok ang napili para sa pag-aaral. Ang semi-structured na panayam ay ginabayan ng pangunahing tanong: ano ang kahulugan ng iyong sitwasyon na nabubuhay ngayon sa pandemya ng COVID-19? Ang mga natuklasan ng pag-aaral ay nagsiwalat ng limang pangunahing tema na kumakatawan sa mga karanasan ng mga kalahok sa gitna ng pandemya ng COVID-19, ito ang mga: sosyo-ekonomikong mga limitasyon at pakikibaka, pagtanggap sa kasalukuyang kondisyon, pagtutulungan sa loob ng mga social network, pagkatakot at hindi paniniwala sa sakit, at positibong pananaw sa kanilang kalagayan.

Mga keyword: pinakamahihirap na pamilya; COVID 19; kahirapan; phenomenology; Pilipinas

INTRODUCTION

As the COVID-19 pandemic worsened the poverty condition in many places all over the world, the underprivileged sector, commonly known as the poor, has suffered enormous crises characterized by massive starvation, joblessness, disrupted socio-economic activities, income loss, and even deaths due to hunger (Buheji et al. 2020). Like any other sector in society, the poor in their most vulnerable situations had no choice but to endure the pandemic's ongoing consequences. With their difficult situation, one lingering problem is their experiences living with the current crisis knowing that the pandemic is still ongoing. Their severe conditions are still gradually unfolding and still largely guesstimates at present (Woodhill 2020).

Highly developed countries like the United States of America (USA) have not escaped from the devastating effects of the crisis and the prelude poverty condition with it. The temporary closure of some business establishments in the country to curtail the spread of the disease has resulted in around 8 million Americans falling back into poverty with a monthly poverty rate of 15% to 16.7% in a span of 8 months from February to September 2020 (Parolin et al. 2020).

Moreover, such experiences were also noted in developing countries in Asia like India and Malaysia. Lockdowns and temporary suspension of some economic activities in India resulted in migrant workers returning home jobless with no labor protections (Abed 2020). In Malaysia, some crises during the pandemic were noted among families headed by single moms and widows who became jobless with no savings to use for their daily needs (Rodzi 2020). Considering these, being in poverty during the ongoing pandemic would be difficult, especially for a typical low-income family whose living conditions were already challenging even before the pandemic such as the 4P's or the Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program beneficiaries in the Philippines. As a background, 4P's is a conditional cash grant program of the national government given to the poorest of the poor in the country facilitated by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) (Presidential Communications Operations Office [PCOO] 2021). In particular, the 4P's level 1 beneficiaries according to the Municipal Action Team Office (MATO), were the identified poorest of the poor, or the survival

stage of the three levels of beneficiaries in the 4P's program. The categories of 4P's families were assessed and monitored using the Social Welfare and Development Indicators (SWDI) of the DSWD looking into their socioeconomic status and well-being (SWDI manual 2014). However, because of the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, this expectation seemed to be relatively challenging, especially that many Filipinos were not ready, including the poor, on the unprecedented consequences of the crisis.

In 2018 the poverty at the regional level in Region X of the Philippines has recorded 17.2% poverty incidence with an estimated 193 thousand families in the region where Misamis Occidental ranks second out of the five provinces, yielding 19.3% after the 22.2% poverty incidence in Bukidnon. Bonifacio being one of the municipalities in Misamis Occidental recorded more than 2,000 poor families or 25% of the population (PSA 2020). According to the Municipal 4P's office in Bonifacio, level 1 families are at the top list of the program having the most impoverished conditions among the other groups.

Bonifacio is a landlocked municipality (Phil Atlas 2021). Farming and fishing are the usual means of livelihood in Bonifacio. The municipality is also known for its coconut production and sweet guavas and bananas in agricultural products, while prawns, crabs, bangus, and tilapia are some of its aquacultural products. Even though the municipality is rich in natural resources, poverty still exists. Hence, capturing the experiences 4P's level 1 families in Bonifacio during the COVID-19 pandemic would give the details on the actual situations of their lives. Aside from their lives are already challenging, living during a pandemic is different.

METHODOLOGY

This study used a phenomenological research approach to explore the lived experiences of the 4P's level 1 families living during the COVID-19 pandemic in the municipality of Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental, Philippines. In particular, it was guided by the descriptive phenomenological theory of Edmund Husserl and Hycner's simplified version of phenomenological analysis which looks at reality as a pure phenomenon (Groenewald 2004) and tries to reveal their essence of what makes it

what it is rather than something else (Morrow et al. 2015). A purposive sampling technique was used in determining the participants who were the family heads and belonged to level 1 4P's beneficiaries in the municipality of Bonifacio. The study started with five participants and reached a saturation point of six participants. According to Morse (1994), targeting six participants as a starting number is enough in reaching saturation of data in phenomenological research. In the study, all the family heads who willingly participated in the interview were male. Further, pseudonyms were assigned to the participants to protect their identities such as Mang Cardo, Mang Carding, Mang Ambo, Mang Juan, Mang Pedro, and Mang Tomas. The semi-structured interview guide was the main tool used in gathering data guided by the central question: *what is the meaning of your situation now living with the COVID-19 pandemic?* With the participants' consent, all their responses were audio-recorded.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Table 1 shows that all participants in this study were male. Most of them were farmers(66.67%) whose family members range from five to seven. In terms of educational attainment, it can be observed that half of the participants have attended elementary followed by those who attended high school(33.33%). As to income, 83.33% of households relied on one earner with an estimated daily income that ranged between ₱150-300. As regard their drinking water, most of the participants accessed water through a nearby spring(66.67%), however, one participant was noted to be buying from sold purified/filtered water. The majority of the participants used deep wells(66.67%) for ordinary use, such as for a bath, or cooking while the others pitched water from a nearby spring. It is also noted that more than half of the participants do not have electricity(66.67%) at home which can be linked that most of them also do not have home appliances(83.33%) except for Mang Tomas who has a radio. Further, all the participants do not have any other properties owned.

TABLE 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants

Variables	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Sex/Gender		
• Male	6	100.00
• Female	0	0
Age		
• 35 – 40	1	16.67
• 41 – 45	2	33.33
• 46 – 50	2	33.33
• 51 and above	1	16.67
Work		
• Farm tenant & laborer	4	66.67
• Mason/carpenter	1	16.67
• River pump boar driver	1	16.67
Educational attainment		
• Attended Elementary Education	3	50.00
• Graduate Elementary Education	0	0
• Attended High School Educaiton	2	33.33
• Graduate High School	1	16.67
Number of household members		
• 5	2	33.33
• 6	2	33.33
• 7	2	33.33
No. of Members who earn income		
• 1	5	83.33
• 2	1	16.67

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Estimate Average Daily Income		
• ₱150&below	1	16.67
• ₱151-300	3	50.00
• ₱301-450	1	16.67
• ₱451&above	1	16.67
Source of drinking water		
• Spring	4	66.67
• Brgy. owned water	1	16.67
• Purified water	1	16.67
Water for ordinary use		
• Spring	1	16.67
• Well	4	66.67
• Brgy. owned water	1	16.67
Household Electricity Access		
• Have access	2	33.33
• No access	4	66.67
Home Appliances		
• None	5	83.33
• Radio	1	16.67
Other properties		
• None	6	100.00

EXPERIENCES OF THE PARTICIPANTS AMIDST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The experiences of the participants undergone initial coding resulted to 69 codes and clustered into 11 subthemes. Finally, the subthemes were further grouped into theme clusters that provided

the meanings or the essential of the lived experience of the participants as shown in Table 2, namely: *Socioeconomic Limitations and Struggles, Acceptance of Existing Condition, Interdependence in Social Networks, Fear and Doubt of the Disease, and Optimistic Outlook on their Condition.*

TABLE 2. Experiences, Subthemes and Theme Clusters

Experiences of the participants	Subthemes	Theme Clusters
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having restricted social activities • Avoiding social gathering • Having restricted economic activities • Being forced to stay • Avoiding socialization • Having limited livelihood • Feeling compelled to rely on farming 	Living with Socioeconomic Restrictions	Socioeconomic Limitations and Struggles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being in financial difficulty • Being in difficult situation • Feeling the need to work to work • Having limited income • Struggling to meet daily needs • Feeling compelled to rely on farming • Increasing goods prices • Being in financial difficulty • Having limited resources • Expressing limited financial assistance • Increasing goods prices • Having difficulty to earn income • Having difficulty to provide food • Struggling to meet daily needs • Describing economic condition • Recognizing 4P's benefits • Having limited resources • Being in financial difficulty • Living in difficulty 	Living with High Cost and Limited Resources	

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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Borrowing money • Paying one after the other • Looking for extra income • Having alternative food source • Feeling the need to work to work • Budgeting • Having limited income • Showing resourcefulness • Involving in various activities • Finding ways to earn income • Working to meet daily needs • Taking risks • Finding alternative source of food • Involving in various activities 	Engaging in Resourceful Activities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting impoverished condition • Accepting work situation • Accepting struggling situation 	Accepting Existing Poverty Condition	Acceptance of the Existing Condition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treating illness as natural 	Accepting Existing Health Condition	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping for family's income • Asking help from other people • Asking help from neighbor 	Family and Community Cooperation	Interdependence Within Social Networks
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing fear of disease • Showing fear of getting infected • Showing emotional fear • Having fear from socialization • Showing fear of going out • Showing quarantine fear • Showing fear of the symptoms • Being anxious for his family's safety 	Fear of Vulnerability to the Disease	Fear and Disbelief over the Disease
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowing symptoms • Doubting the existing condition • Disbelieving opinions • Choosing health alternatives • Being in doubt • Doubting quarantine measures 	Doubts of the Disease	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking struggles positively • Thanking God • Being hopeful • Trusting God 	Hopeful to Survive	Optimistic Outlook on their Condition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling geographically secured • Feeling economically secured 	Having Assurance	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Showing non-dependence on Government • Showing self-reliance 	Being Independent	

Theme cluster: socioeconomic limitations and struggles

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the everyday living of the participants was marked with struggles meeting their daily needs amid the restrictions imposed in their respective communities. The *socioeconomic limitations and struggles* experienced by the participants were described in the following subthemes: *living with socioeconomic restrictions*, *living with high cost and limited resources*, and *engaging in resourceful activities*.

Living with socioeconomic restrictions. The first notable experience common to the participants' lives during the pandemic was restriction. This restriction was about implementing the health protocols in their respective communities, which affected their daily social and economic activities. Their lives were disrupted by the restrictions since they had to abide by them or face the enforcers of the protocols. For instance, Mang Cardo exemplifies restrictons in social gathering in their community:

“We stay away sir, for it’s too risky. If there’s a crowd of people, we refrained from getting near with them. We avoided social gathering. There was a time sir there in our neighborhood, one social gathering, it was really prohibited sir to pursue the activity, they knew they have violated the protocols sir on social gathering, and our barangay captain reminded them but still they continue. It was a birthday celebration. Since people were hungry and they gathered. However, there was one who was diagnosed as positive [COVID-19 positive], so all of them were quarantined and the barangay captain got really angry about it.”

Moreover, Mang Carding while comparing his experience before and during the pandemic desired to get free from the restrictions; however, he had no choice but to stay on the farm.

“Life before the pandemic was better as we could go anywhere we want to. Unlike today, where we couldn’t go anywhere, movement of people is controlled; we just dwell on our farmland. If ever we wanted to go out, we were afraid because we do not have any documents (border passes) to show when somebody will ask it from us.”

A struggling daily life in finding income was similarly experienced by Mang Juan. He said:

“It’s hard now to find a work for a living, others do not even have food for consumption. Before, when there was yet no COVID-19, we could find ways to earn money. Very disrupting! We have stopped going around. We just confined ourselves here in Linconan. We cannot do otherwise.”

Despite the above, Mang Juan still took the risk by traveling to other places because his family only relied on him for their daily needs. Meanwhile, Mang Pedro reminded his family to avoid social gatherings, especially since some of their neighbors were in quarantine. He also mentioned that they do not have other work to rely on except farming. Further, Mang Tomas related that his wife lost her job selling food to a nearby school because of the suspension of classes. He also reminded his family to stay at home. Due to the imposed restrictions in their communities, work opportunities became less available for them. Sadly, other people still violated health protocols. According to Mang Cardo, the problem of hunger amidst the pandemic forced some people in their community to commit violations of social distancing and prohibition of mass gatherings. For instance, a birthday celebration of their neighbor invited several members of their community to gather and co-celebrate. In addition, this social context explains the prevalence of the collectivistic nature of Asian cultures, where individuals looked at the group identity as being separated or isolated from the group would mean new for Asian communities (Kawamura 2012).

Participants’ experiences are consistent in the study of Philippson et al.(2020) on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural economies that the restrictions imposed in the communities have affected peoples’ lives which are connected to the pervading disruption of their social relations, structures, and community participation, with the changed set-up from out-of-home to in-home lifestyles and more specifically isolated living. Implementing health protocols in their community is a way to curb the spread of COVID-19. In Malaysia, Yusoff & Sarifin(2021) mentioned that social distancing is one of the operative measures to stop the spread of infection according to the World Health Organization. Hence, the Malaysian government implemented the Movement Control Order(MCO) which the majority of their citizens obeyed. Some who disobeyed reasoned that they attended important businesses such as going to the hospital, attending a funeral, and going to work.

Living with high cost and limited resources. Life during the pandemic was challenging as participants only have the limited resources while the prices of basic commodities went high. They received limited income from work, benefits from the 4P’s, money or food they could borrow from their *suki sari-sari store* (small retailer store where they regularly buy their needs), and among others. This condition described the experiences of the participants. For instance, Mang Cardo as a farmer said:

“Life today is much more difficult for us farmers, sir. We are very affected with the lower price of rice in the market, before it was bought at ₱24.00 per kilo but today it drops to ₱17.00 or ₱18.00, especially that most of the restaurants or karenderya were closed today because of the pandemic. That is why we are so affected; having no source of income and the situation is like this? We often resorted to borrowing money.”

Mang Carding also recognized life’s difficulty amidst the pandemic. He said:

“Life in this time of pandemic is a bit difficult for us sir. We are having difficulty in our work sir, to find an income. For me sir, if there will be no work such as replenishing the farm, I will have no income. The farm I took care could only give me twice a year income. I have also observed sir the rise of food prices but the problem is I do not have money to buy. If some members in the family sir got sick and we have no money, we have to owe money. If sometimes also we fell short sir with our food budget, I go fishing in the river just to have something on the table.”

Similarly, Mang Pedro expressed that being a beneficiary of the 4’Ps program helped them in one way to deal with the pandemic but not sufficient to meet their daily needs:

“If I get a job, and will be paid of ₱450.00 a week, we’ll use it to buy soap, soy sauce, and cooking oil, trying to make it enough for our needs. Sometimes when I am favorably paid, we buy fish for our viand. We have to budget sir, to live within our means. There are times when we got-short of rice supply, we’ll have rice porridge for our meal.”

For Mang Ambo, he utilized what they have and spent it wisely on essential goods. Living with high costs and limited resources during the COVID-19 pandemic was very challenging on the part of the participants. The limited mobility that has spilled over their activities caused drastic effects on their access to work opportunities in earning additional income. As a result, they were incapacitated in meeting their necessities and more dependent and indebted to sari-sari stores. Moreover, the rise in the prices of essential commodities made their situation worse and can push them into extreme poverty. According to Buheji et al. (2020) poverty means a lack of basic capacity to participate effectively in a society where people are deprived of the right to enjoy necessities in life. That is why most of the participants have resorted to a cycle of owing money or food from a nearby sari-sari store, which they paid after they earn an income.

Engaging in resourceful activities. Some participants were resourceful in managing their financial difficulty to meet the family’s basic needs. Mang Cardo said:

“It was really difficult sir that is why we have borrowed money from our neighbor who has a store. I am also taking care hectares of farm from three different masters. With this, I can turn to anyone of them in times of our needs and pay them during harvest time. Good, that my mother has a hectare of land purely planted with big trees. I got the favor of cutting trees for lumber and enjoyed the benefit of using them for free where I only paid the cost for sawing. This is extra income for me. Besides, planting papaya trees alongside of the farm and have the harvested fruits sold at Tambulig (a place in Misamis Occidental, Philippines).”

On the other hand, Mang Juan’s resourceful activities were planting root crops to augment their daily expenses. He also uttered:

“We have planted to contend the increase of prices of basic commodities, today we are challenged to be brave and strategic especially in nature of our work, we need to be smart and find ways to earn income even though we sometimes feel our travelling to other places is almost like a suicide. When my income is not enough, I do not have a choice but to indulge myself in borrowing money.”

Mang Tomas’ resourceful ways were shown in how his family managed to budget their food, particularly using root crops as food alternatives to sustain and augment their daily needs. Managing their meager income was difficult the reason most participants resorted to owing money or food, engaged in small-scale gardening as an alternative food source, and adjusted their complete meals by having rice porridge and salt.

The participants’ experiences revealed that the pandemic has worsen their struggle as they needed more alternative economic activities. Food and Agriculture Organization (2020) report affirmed that the poverty condition of people in rural areas such as the causal day laborers, including the farmers, were significantly hit due to loss of income. In addition, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD](2020) stressed that several households at different levels of income had very few resources to cope with the consequences of the pandemic, such as loss of income and increase in expenditures pulled these households under severe financial conditions.

The new economic and social challenges brought by the pandemic have put the participants into a dilemma between abiding by the protocols and staying safe but with insufficient resources to feed their family or going out by taking the risks of being infected with the disease yet providing the needs of the family.

Theme cluster: acceptance of the existing condition

The theme cluster *acceptance of existing condition* is supported by the following subthemes: *accepting existing poverty condition* and *accepting existing health condition*. This denotes that despite struggles the participants experienced, they accepted their conditions knowing that the pandemic was beyond their full control.

Accepting existing poverty condition. Some participants came to accept the poverty situation they were in. For most of them such condition was not already new for they were used to it. The following statements from Mang Carding demonstrated this:

“Ahh, for us sir being in poverty is normal. We cannot weep. We are already used to this. Just like this situation, that we are already booked to have work when we go home, this makes us happy although there are intervals in the availability of our work. But that’s it, no work, no income.”

Meanwhile, Mang Juan recognized their poverty and accepted the condition of his work:

“Our most struggling experience this pandemic is being nothing, our nothingness, if we do not have work, then we do not have income, nothing is left, nothing anymore. Ahh, just thinking that it’s nothing, we just need to strive, strive to live.”

The participants accepted poverty since they did not have a choice. They regarded their impoverished situation as real, and something that they need to accept. This explains their recognition, realization and perspective about living in the midst of pandemic. Deepa et al.(1999) as cited in Buheji et al.(2020), collected books about the voices of people and how they feel about poverty; a poor man from Kenya(1997) said: “Do not ask me what poverty is because you have met me outside my house. Look at my utensils and the clothes that I am wearing. Look at everything and write what you see. What you see is poverty.” The experiences of some participants during the pandemic had made them recognized and accepted their condition. Further, in the study of Jacinto (2020), he revealed a time in the lives of the poor that they accepted their conditions or situations, especially when poverty runs from their parents and have been experienced during their formative years. This acceptance enabled the poor to plan realistically on how to deal with poverty.

Accepting health condition issues. This sub-theme considers COVID-19 symptoms as typical or common disease that people have already experienced. Mang Cardo said:

“For us, it’s just natural, for example last week when I got a fever that lasted for an entire week, I did not go to a doctor, and instead I personally took medication, because nowadays almost all illnesses are directly considered as COVID-19.”

Mang Cardo’s experience with having flu and other similar symptoms of COVID-19 were naturally occurring illnesses even before the pandemic since it is when people are diagnosed using laboratory results, they could know someone as COVID-19 positive. It is in this experience that the participants regarded the disease as normal. This belief of accepting the disease as normal is a way in which Mang Cardo dealt with the current situation. However, what happened to Mang Cardo was due to inadequate awareness of the nature of COVID-19. This information gap was present in their community since majority do not have the technologies to access information from reliable

sources such as news on television or radio. Similarly, in a cross-sectional study conducted in the US about the awareness, attitude, and actions among adults related to COVID-19, revealed that about 28.3% or nearly one-third of the adults in the US could hardly identify COVID-19 symptoms, which resulted to a more confusing and challenging situation for people (Wolf et al. 2020).

Comparing COVID-19 as more likely the same as the flu, the participants felt that it could be overcome through self-medication using herbal medicines instead of going to the hospital. The participants’ experiences explained how Filipinos have learned to manage themselves during difficult times. In Filipino culture, the product of adaptation by communities from several disasters, or calamities that went through the country permit the incorporation of threat into their daily life, which is referred to as “normalization of threat” (Bankoff 2009, pp. 226 as cited in Ang & Diaz n.d.). Hence, Filipinos were also resilient since they have learned how to pack their burdens correctly to bear the weight more lightly (Bankoff 2009, pp. 226 as cited Ang & Diaz n.d.).

Theme cluster: interdependence within the social networks

Some of the participants pointed out that amid the daily struggle they faced, they have experienced the need to be interdependent with each other to earn more and overcome their problems. This is seen in the subthemes *family cooperation* and *community cooperation*.

Family cooperation. As Mang Cardo related, there were times that he asked his children to work in the farm to earn additional income for the family:

“I asked my son John Paul and daughters Sheena and Shella Mae to help me in the farm chores such as “pamuna”(replenishing) and “pangibot”(pulling-out) for extra income for the family. We also grab the time when my mother asked our help to work on her farm to have an income, because unlike in the rice field that we are taking care of, it’s free of charge, it’s our work as tenant. However, if someone will hire and ask me to work on their farm, I usually get my family members to earn and help for the family.”

Community cooperation. Similarly, cooperation among the participants in the community was evident by helping one another in times of crisis to meet the family’s needs and to overcome their problem as a whole. For instance Mang Juan said:

“It’s really hard; sometimes we cannot buy anything for viand. We resorted to vegetables or asked the same from our neighborhood. We seldom buy fish, for the price is too expensive.”

Mang Cardo also shared his being open and generous by extending help not only within his family but also towards other people in their community. He mentioned:

“Sometimes sir because of the difficult situation, my sibling from Tambulig will come here to ask help such as rice and in some instances my neighbors, we can actually share them sir what we have especially on rice as observed to be the need for most of us.”

According to Johnson & Johnson(2001), “cooperation exists when individuals work together to accomplish shared goals. Likewise, cooperating for a common goal of survival was manifested among the participants amidst the pandemic. Further, Mang Cardo’s experience exemplified the importance of generosity and sacrificing one’s resources for the common good, one of the positive values of Filipinos. Seeking help was a way for some participants to continue providing the needs of the family. In a more contextualized term, this Filipino characteristic is referred to as the *bayanihan spirit* or the inherent goodness to help each other which is founded on the categorization of Filipino values’ coping mechanism by F. Landa Jocano. The participants’ *bayanihan spirit* amidst the pandemic also showcased their unity and camaraderie to build a strong support system in their community (Ang & Diaz n.d.). This too rooted from the family-centeredness among Filipinos towards difficult situation wherein the community they lived formed part of it. One can understand this that Philippines has experienced different types of calamities and Filipinos remained to be resilient and have positively overcome such adversities (Ang & Diaz n.d.). Even Jacinto(2020) found out that those poor who wanted to overcome poverty encouraged every family member to contribute to the family’s needs. Social networks were also seen significant if one has to survive poverty. These networks are composed of friends, neighbors, and relatives who operate interdependently in the community to overcome poverty.

Theme cluster: fear and disbelief over the disease

Despite some participants considered COVID-19 to be a common disease, most participants also feared of getting transmitted or infected with it. However, when asked more about their experiences,

they revealed doubts about the prevalence of cases in their locality, especially on the symptoms that make COVID-19 seem a common illness. Their fear and disbelief over the disease are expressed in the subthemes: *emotional fear* and *health uncertainty*.

Fear of vulnerability to the disease. Having fear of being inflicted with the disease is evident among the participants. Mang Cardo stated:

“I felt scared for it’s known to be deadly disease; if my entire family will be quarantined, what shall we do?”

Meanwhile, Mang Juan knowing about COVID-19 from the talks in their community avoided social gatherings. He slowly stopped from smoking and drinking liquors. He said:

“It was scary and I felt very scared. Knowing from the news I have heard here in our place about this COVID-19, I am scared of being infected. That is why I have avoided from any forms of gathering, such as drinking liquors and smoking.”

Moreover, Mang Pedro also verbalized being afraid to get infected upon knowing that someone could die from the disease. Even Mang Tomas expressed this fear:

“I am so scared on this disease, for the enemy is invisible. Unlike to having wrangled with somebody whom you are definitely sure of your opponent. According to them, we should be careful in getting along with anyone or with people for they might be carriers of the disease called COVID...I told my children to keep away from contact with somebody especially stranger.”

The possibility of getting infected anytime from the virus has been one of the worries of the participants in the pandemic. Their experiences showed how afraid and anxious they were about their health and safety. Therefore, they learned to follow the health and safety protocols such as social distancing and avoiding social gatherings. As heads of their families, some participants advised family members to stay at home if possible.

Their experiences are supported by the study of Schimmenti et al. (2020) who argued that the fear experiences of people during the pandemic were organized in a psychological level of four interrelated dialectical domains. These domains are *fear of the body*, *fear of/for significant others*, *fear of knowing and not knowing*, and *fear of taking action*. In the context of the participants’ experiences, they can be seen in the domains of fear of the body and fear of/for significant others. This fear experience is also similar in the cross-sectional survey conducted by Wolf et al. (2020) in the US, where 24.6% of adults felt ‘very worried’ from COVID-19 transmission. Fear

of contagion as what participants also experienced is one of the emotional symptoms among Salvadoreans in residential lockdown due to the pandemic (Orellana & Orellana, 2020). The fear of death due to COVID-19 pandemic has led to implications in the population such as changes in work schedules, feeling of helplessness and isolation (Ornell et al. 2020). Consequently, this fear of the COVID-19 has been associated to anxiety and stress which the participants also experienced (Tzur Bitan et al. as cited in Rodriguez-Hidalgo et al. 2020).

Doubts of the disease. While having fear on the disease, none of them seemed to have a clear understanding of the nature of COVID-19. Aside from knowing the disease from news on television or radio and conversations in their community, many doubted its emergence. One reason was the symptoms of COVID-19 are similar to the typical flu they had experienced before. Mang Cardo shared:

“The news tells the symptoms such as of cough and fever just like the common illness, when you have these, then you will be readily diagnosed as positive from the disease.”

Meanwhile, Mang Carding observed that some of those he had known suspected from COVID-19 who underwent quarantine recovered from merely taking paracetamol, the same way of treating a fever which made them confused and afraid of going for hospitalization. He said:

“Some who were quarantined were just taking in paracetamol and they did not die. Before the strike of COVID-19, fever was just a normal illness. We went for a check-up. This time we are already afraid of going for a check-up if having a fever, we just decided to take herbal medicines.”

Based on the participants' responses, their doubts were rooted in their confusion. Such confusion happens in distinguishing an actual COVID-19 case from the typical flu. According to Schimmenti et al. (2020), when people are exposed to information they usually heard or known about from their environment, they keep on recalling and relying on that information, which leads to biased reasoning and confusion. The fear of not knowing pertains to the need to know that peoples' fear experiences are associated with their doubts and are triggered by making sense of their environment.

Theme cluster: optimistic outlook on their condition

Amidst their experiences, *optimistic outlook on their condition* was reflected among the participants' experiences. This optimism is expressed in the subthemes *hopeful to survive, having assurance, and being independent*.

Hopeful to survive. One of the interesting experiences of the participants was optimism towards their situation despite pandemic. Mang Cardo said that the struggling condition he was facing is just a challenge. He also acknowledged that God will help them survive from these challenges and that giving or sharing with others at this time of pandemic is still possible. He said:

“These are all but trials, and momentary only. We will soon surpass all these things. We will all survive in this. This will pass away when the right time comes and we will all be free. We'll have to keep moving forward sir, continue with the module[class], support my children, and do not lose hope. We may be in difficult situation now, but this does not deprive us from giving. We give because we believe that blessings will unexpectedly come for example, sometimes I was called for a job that I did not expect to have. God will really provide.”

Conversely, Mang Juan articulated his motivation in striving to overcome his struggles due to financial difficulty:

“For me, it's bearable. I am trying. I find ways, such as borrowing money or looking for favorable or any work opportunities.”

The participants' hope for something positive from their situation helped them deal with their struggles amidst the pandemic. Spirituality too played a role in the experience of Mang Cardo in holding an optimistic view of his life amidst the pandemic. Like other nationalities, this quality among Filipinos according to Ignacio (2010) as cited by Ang et al.(n.d.) allows them to become resilient in times of extremely difficult situation. It can be observed that religious faith is one major coping mechanism of Filipinos when they have to manage the distress that tests their limits of endurance. Their experience supported the Philippine Survey Research Center in the mid-2020 which revealed that 88% of the Filipinos were optimistic that the country as a whole could overcome the COVID-19 pandemic (Paroza 2020). Even Leslie-Miller et al.(2021) stressed the benefits of anticipating future positive events and maintaining higher optimism in the USA amidst the COVID-19 pandemic relates to a higher state of positive anticipation which formed part of the adaptive responses of people.

Having assurance. Moreover, two participants stressed about the assurance of overcoming their struggles and from the threats against the disease:

“I think the farm is safer unlike that in the city, it’s dangerous (Mang Juan).”

“Not at all, hmm...it’s better to be at a remote place such as here in the farm, if you planted something, you would have something to reap for food (Mang Tomas).”

Having positive perspectives, Mang Juan and Mang Tomas recognized that their geographical location in the farm compared to cities gave them a feeling of security from the threats of the disease due to few population and limited social interactions. Further, they can plant vegetables and root crops in the farm, an advantage as these resources are within their reach. This is consistent with Koko’s(2020) research on the number of COVID-19 cases and deaths in the USA, emphasizing that urban areas became the hotspots of virus transmission compared to rural areas. In England and Wales, the Office of the National Statistics revealed the same pattern of cases and deaths, highlighting many cases in urban compared to rural (Koko 2020). This is what Duranton & Puga(2020) meant that population density and interaction are crucial features in understanding cities’ situations, particularly differentiating urban from rural areas amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Being independent. Conversely, some participants believed that they have strived to become independent so that they do not rely on what the government can provide them. This was obvious in the following statements:

“Why are they blaming the government? If one is smart at responding to the situation, he will not remain poor. Some only rely on benefits they got from 4P’s. They do not mind looking for other means to sustain. On my part, I really find ways. I have planted banana in the farm I took care which gave me another income. Sometimes after harvest season, I engage in balot business which my boss also entrusted to me. Although, it only gave us ₱1.00 per egg, it still helps us. We just have to be resourceful and not too dependent from[government] (Mang Cardo).”

Mang Tomas also shared his stand towards non-reliance to government amidst the pandemic. He said:

“What is important is not to solely rely from the government’s relief or assistance. It’s not good to entirely rely from government’s support. We should do our part, to alleviate poverty, for the government is also facing tremendous crisis.”

Being independent among the participants refers to their resilient view of living with the pandemic. They expressed a great deal of concern on the government’s status responding to the different problems of the country. As Mang Cardo emphasized that at this time of the pandemic people should be ‘*madiskarte*’ or resourceful enough to find the resolves of their problems. Having accumulated enough resources, he shared his resources to anyone who came to him and ask for his help. A similar approach of independence or self-reliance amidst pandemic has been evident in rural India. The pandemic gave its rural people the lesson towards self-reliance to achieve self-sufficiency rather than remaining dependent on others. Self-sufficiency in livelihood has manifested the need to shift to economic locallocation (Shreya; Kothari as cited in Alam et al.2021).

CONCLUSION

The lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic of the participants belonging to 4P’s level 1 families in Bonifacio, Misamis Occidental meant socioeconomic limitations and struggles, acceptance of the existing condition, interdependence within social network, fear and disbelief over the disease and optimistic outlook on their condition. In general, the COVID-19 pandemic is economically, socially, and psychologically disruptive among the participants. It is economically and socially disruptive as they strived hard to earn a living while following health protocols on social distancing and limited movement. Psychologically, the pandemic created a dilemma between living in hunger or facing the danger of working outside and crossing borders to earn a living. They also developed a fear of being infected with the disease while doubting its nature. Notwithstanding, they remained socially connected by helping one another in the community while elevating optimism and hope that they can survive the pandemic. The pandemic has taught the participants to be resourceful and self-reliant in facing challenges for the common goal of surviving. The socioeconomic struggle of the participants mirrors the true situation of ordinary people and those in poverty in times of a pandemic. Given the limited and disadvantaged situation of poor people amidst the pandemic, they were forced to take the initiatives to find alternative means of living just to survive, without much reliance on the government

considering the tight virus containment measures implemented. In some instances, they were forced to incur debts among small-scale retail stores in their community.

In a nutshell, the COVID-19 pandemic tested the participants' resourcefulness when their socioeconomic conditions became undesirable, their character when they accepted the reality of their existing condition, their being human when they experienced fear and disbelief over issues of COVID-19, their interdependence with one another amidst their individualistic and diversified needs, self-reliance and optimism in looking forward in spite their present struggling condition.

The participants' experiences call for the Local Government Unit to design and implement restriction guidelines that are responsive to the socioeconomic needs of the people. Moreover, livelihood programs suited to the context during the pandemic can be considered for those who have lost their main jobs to sustain their daily needs. The government through its Department of Health may conduct an intensified information dissemination program campaign on COVID-19 that reaches all sectors of society to fill in the gaps and issues about the disease.

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