Lived experiences of community volunteers: Exploring volunteerism during the pandemic

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ABSTRACT

This is a qualitative study using descriptive phenomenology on the lived experiences of community volunteers during the Covid-19 pandemic. Data were collected through interviews, using a semi-structured questionnaire and interview guide. The respondents of the study were 24 community volunteers who assisted in the relief operation when the city was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). Results showed that the reasons for volunteering include social responsibility, ease of boredom, and establishing friendships. Despite the fear of contracting the virus, community volunteers assisted in the repacking of rice, canned goods, sugar, legumes, and food items. Other tasks include inventory of the packed goods, sorting and organizing food packs, unloading and loading relief goods to transport trucks, encoding the names of household heads, making reports, and monitoring statistics and distribution of relief goods. The values inherent in the community volunteers are compassion, optimism, and selflessness. The lived experiences of community volunteers shed insights into the importance of volunteerism and the need to support them in the volunteering process.

1. Introduction

Social science researchers conduct studies to generate information that cannot be holistically derived from other studies. The role of social science research is to situate the pandemic within the various social and cultural contexts of people's lives. Covid-19 may be the main topic of concern of the times, but it is not the be-all and end-all of human existence.

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused havoc not only to physical health and emotional behavior but also to social solidarity. Initially, the first human response to a pandemic is fear and anxiety for one's life and family. Because of too much fear and anxiety, some people resort to food hoarding of essential goods. A large percentage of people experienced food hoarding and showed concern only for themselves and their family members due to the pandemic (Wang & Hao, 2020). These acts may have been done intentionally or not, have lessened societal unity and cohesion in times of crisis. The individualistic instinct prevails above the values of empathy, generosity, and even trust. The enhanced community quarantine also added to social division, as people are not allowed to go out and help others in need.

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted global systems, leading to significant challenges. However, it also prompted a surge in volunteerism, with individuals assisting in

various capacities to support their communities. At the heart of the Covid-19 pandemic, volunteers have demonstrated an exceptional display of solidarity across the world (United Nations, 2020). In the Philippines, community lockdowns and quarantines were implemented to stop the spread of the virus (Mutya, et al., 2022). The Philippine government issued Presidential Proclamation No. 922, series of 2020 "Declaring a State of Public Health Emergency throughout the Philippines" (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2020). This proclamation placed the Philippines under a state of a public health emergency. Consequently, the provincial government of Negros Oriental also issued Province of Negros Oriental Executive Order No. 2020-26 on March 31, 2020, to place the entire province under the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2020). With the implementation of the ECQ in the province, schools and business establishments were closed, public transportation was suspended, and movement and travel from one locality to another were restricted. Many people lost their jobs; hence, the government was obligated to provide for them. Aside from the cash subsidy given to the qualified beneficiaries and those affected by the pandemic, the government provided relief assistance to all the residents of the city in the form of goods such as rice, canned goods, sugar, coffee, etc. The Department of Social Welfare and Development was responsible for managing the relief assistance operations. However, distributing goods to all the residents is a challenging task due to the large number of households. Before distribution, the goods will be repacked and allocated for each household and barangay.

In April 2020, the relief assistance operation on repacking goods started with community volunteers at the City Evacuation and Multipurpose Center. There was a call for volunteers in one of the radio stations and because of this, some volunteers went to the Evacuation Center to offer their services. However, many of the volunteers confessed that it was through their friends that they knew about the matter. This kind of volunteerism may be classified as emergent volunteerism where the community volunteers acted in response to an emergency or disaster (Whittaker et al., 2015). The volunteers rendered services in their communities without monetary rewards and recognition. This study seeks to document their lived experiences to better understand the emerging if not existing emotions, behavior patterns, and values that prevail in times of pandemic. On the same vignette, this study provides insights that would foster greater appreciation and understanding of who we are as Filipinos. And as Filipinos, we thrive to heal as one.

2. Theoretical basis

As defined "Volunteering is the course of action that individuals' willingness to perform without anticipating any payment to help other people, community and organization" (Myketun & Himanen, 2016, pp. 246-273 as cited in Husnina et al., 2017). The term "volunteerism" comes from the Latin word *voluntas* which means "will" or "freedom" (Lalengzama, 2024, p. 117). The New Dictionary of Social Work (Timms & Timms, 1982, pp. 208-209) defined a volunteer as: "a person who offers his or her service or who is recruited to render a service at a welfare agency, usually without remuneration."

There are three types of volunteerism developed during the pandemic, namely; personal volunteerism, organization/institutional volunteerism, and community volunteerism (Primahendra et al., 2020). It is sad to note that despite the acknowledged role of volunteerism in community development, participation in volunteering activities has continued to decline

each year (Biddle & Gray, 2020; Husnina et al., 2017). During the Covid-19 pandemic, community engagement and volunteering are essential to public response. Social networks and connections, local knowledge and social trust were the key dimensions associated with community organizing and volunteering (Mao et al., 2021).

2.1. Four models of volunteering

There are four models of volunteering according to Thaits and Hewitt (2001). These are: (1.) Volunteer Motivation Model, (2.) Values and Attitude Model, (3.) Role-identity Model and (4.) Volunteer Personality Model. The volunteer motivation model emphasizes the roles of individual motivation in volunteering such as learning new skills, increase self-esteem, career preparation, etc. The second model stresses the link between volunteering and individual belief as well as the values and value system of the volunteer. The third model shows that past performance or voluntary action of a person leads to the development of a role identity which further enables one to do the voluntary work once again. The last model suggests that there are personalities as disposition variables that favor volunteering. Volunteer participation is higher in individuals with internal control, high self-esteem and emotional stability (Thaits & Hewitt, 2001).

These models give preferential insights into the framework of the study when looking into the dynamics of volunteerism, the motivations to volunteer would serve as springboard to explain the volunteering behavior. Motivation provides people with a cause to take up volunteer work. This has played a major role in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic crisis (Sengupta & Al-Khalifa, 2022).

2.2. Theory of Reasoned Action

The Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) by Fishbein and Ajzen (2010) espoused that the main predictor of intention is attitude which is described as individual belief that enables him/her to behave in accordance to what he/she believes. The attitudinal factors were made by behavioral systems such as behavioral belief in an outcome and evaluation of that outcome. If the individual believes that performing a behavior will have a positive effect then his/her attitude towards it will become favorable. The volunteers may believe that what they are doing has positive consequences, hence, there is reason for them to continue volunteering (Husnina et al., 2017).

In this study, the reasons for volunteering are taken into account since these are also what motivate the community volunteers to engage with others and participated in the volunteering process. As a guiding framework, the theory looks into the attitudes and belief of the individuals and guides the researcher on the assumption that the act of volunteering may be based on them.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

The descriptive phenomenology is utilized with the purpose to examine a phenomenon as individuals experience it and directly describe it without considering its causal explanations (Husserl, 1970). Phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals' lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon focusing on what they have in common as they experience it (Creswell, 2007).

3.2. Research setting

This study is conducted in one of the cities of the province of Negros Oriental, Philippines where an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was implemented by virtue of Executive Order no. 2020-26 of the Province of Negros Oriental on March 8, 2020 to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus (Office of the President of the Philippines, 2020). Among the highlights of the executive order was the mandatory stay at home order for all residents and strict border restrictions.

3.3. Research participants

There were twenty-four (24) participants in the study. They were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (1.) willingness to participate in the study, (2.) has rendered volunteer work during the duration of the ECQ and (3.) has resided in the locality. Purposive sampling technique was used based on the criteria.

3.4. Data collection and ethical considerations

Health protocols such as wearing of face masks and maintaining physical distancing of almost two (2) meters were observed during the data collection. Data were collected mainly through interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. Before the standard questions, preliminary briefing on the purpose of the study was made and the benefits the study can bring to them. Rapport was built ensuring that participants are comfortable and at ease during the entire interview. The participants gave their consent to be interviewed and expressed their willingness to share their experiences. Since one of the participants was a minor, parental consent was sought allowing the minor to participate in the study.

The interview with the participants of the study lasted for 15 - 20. The participants were given time to elaborate on their answers. The researchers also asked follow-up questions on answers that needed clarifications. The interview ended when all the questions had been answered exhaustively.

3.5. Research instrument and data analysis

A semi-structured questionnaire was used to get the demographic profiles of the participants. The questionnaire includes the age, gender, civil status, and occupation of the participants. In the interview, an interview guide was prepared containing several open-ended questions. For better understanding, both English and Cebuano languages were used in asking the open-ended questions.

The data collected were analyzed using the Colaizzi Method (Morrow et al., 2015). Pseudonyms were used to hide the true identity of the participant. The following steps were done in the process.

1. After the interview, the answers were transcribed and recorded individually.

2. The transcripts of interviews were read and re-read to get a general overview of the entire content.

3. Significant and repetitive statements were extracted and grouped into sets.

4. From the data sets, meanings were formulated and sorted into statement clusters.

5. Unified emerging themes were taken out of the statement clusters that explain the phenomenon as shared experiences.

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Demographic profile of the participants

There were twenty-four (24) participants in the study. Table 1 shows the profile of the respondents as to gender, age, occupation, and civil status. There were sixteen (16) females, six (6) males, and two (2) LGBTQ members. Eleven (11) participants are students, while the rest are teachers, office staff, caregivers, cook, dressmaker, and liaison officer. There are three (3) participants who are unemployed. Most of the participants are single. The lowest age is 16, and the highest age is 61 years old.

Table 1

Profile of the Respondents

Respondent (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age	Occupation	Civil Status
Aiza	Female	59	Care giver	Married
Bella	Female	57	Cook	Widow
Carina	Female	61	Dressmaker	Widow
Dina	Female	48	Unemployed	Married
Edgar	Male	26	Teacher	Single
Fara	Female	42	Teacher	Married
Gio	Male	23	Student	Single
Hara	Female	21	Student	Single
Ian	Male	36	Office Staff	Single
Jessa	Female	26	Student	Single
Kent	Male	16	Student	Single
Lady	Female	18	Student	Single
Manny	Male	18	Student	Single
Nilo	Male	35	Teacher	Single
Oscar	LGBTQ	25	Office Staff	Single
Pearl	Female	45	Teacher	Married
Queenie	Female	18	Student	Single
Risa	Female	29	Liaison Officer	Single
Stella	Female	21	Student	Single
Tina	LGBTQ	18	Student	Single
Ulah	Female	23	Student	Single
Verna	Female	24	Student	Single
Will	Male	29	Unemployed	Single
Yassy	Female	26	Unemployed	Single

Note. The original names of the participants are replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity

4.1.1. Reasons for volunteering during the pandemic

In investigating the reasons for community volunteers to volunteer during the Covid-19 pandemic, the key themes that arose from the study are social responsibility, ease of boredom, and friendship network.

Table 2

Reasons for Volunteering

Pseudonyms	Reasons for Volunteering	Cluster Themes
Hara	*I wanted to give back to the community, and it is my responsibility to the society to be a volunteer.*	Social Responsibility
Pearl	*I wanted to help my fellow Baisanons and my city.*	
Bella	*I wanted to do my part as a good citizen amidst the lockdown.*	
Tina	*My reason for volunteering was to help my fellow men and to show that I care for them.*	
Ian	*I volunteered because I want to help the people in my community. This is the time to help as one, since there is a crisis.*	
Oscar	*I was bored in the house. I just wanted to go out for my sanity, but never did I expect that volunteering would be such a fun experience.*	Ease of Boredom and Depression
Nilo	*I was depressed and I was worried that if I stayed at home something bad will happen to me because of this. So, I decided to volunteer.*	
Will	*Since there's nothing much to do at our house, I wanted to make use of my time productively and also help my fellow Baisanons.*	
Risa	*Since there was a lockdown, there was nothing to do. So, I helped so that I can find something to do, which is also good.*	
Stella	*It was my way of helping people of Bais, and I also found it enjoyable because I was with my friend who volunteered.*	Friendship/Establishing Friendship
Manny	*Doing volunteer work allowed me to do bonding with my friends.*	
Verna	*I volunteered because I wanted to meet new people and expand my network of contacts.*	
Ulah	*My friends and I agreed to volunteer together.*	
Gio	*It was my friend who recruited me to volunteer.*	

Note. These are the verbatim responses of the participants clustered into themes. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities

The respondents answered that social responsibility was the main reason why they

volunteered at the City Evacuation Center during the Covid-19 pandemic. Heeding the call to be volunteers in the relief assistance operations, most of them believed that they need to help their fellowmen and that it is their social responsibility to volunteer.

The findings of the study also revealed that ease from boredom is one of the reasons why the community volunteers offered their services during the pandemic. Many of the volunteers got bored by just staying at home with nothing to do. Others felt that to avoid boredom, which would possibly lead to depression, volunteer work allows them to be productive and spend their time wisely.

Most of the respondents affirmed that establishing and maintaining a friendship network is one of the reasons why they volunteer during the pandemic. Their friends motivated them to volunteer. Those who have no friends among the volunteers were able to create new friendships during the volunteer work.

The camaraderie among community volunteers was seen as they all worked for the same goals. Experiencing the same work daily as volunteers enabled the respondents to bond with old friends and create new friendship with others. At the end of a tiring day, their spirits and morale are lifted as they talk and eat food donations. They also had "TikTok" dance sessions as a way of releasing their stress and physical fatigue. Many of the volunteers professed that they enjoyed volunteer work and would volunteer again if their services were needed.

4.1.2. Challenges faced in volunteering

The activities of the community volunteers focused on relief assistance operations that were held inside the City Evacuation and Multipurpose Center. The various tasks given to the female volunteers include repacking rice, canned goods, sugar, legumes, and noodles to be distributed to all the households of the city, inventory of the packed goods, and sorting and organizing the food packs. A few of the volunteers were assigned to help in the clerical work, such as encoding the names of household heads per barangay, making reports, and monitoring statistics. Most of the male volunteers were assigned to carry the sacks of rice from the trucks to the repacking area and load the relief goods into the vehicles for distribution. Several of them also helped in the giving and distribution of the relief goods to the people in the barangays. The repacking of goods is not an easy task since thousands of 50-kilo sacks of rice and boxes of canned goods have to be repacked for each of the relief packs to contain 05 kilos of rice, sardines, sugar, coffee, etc.

4.1.3. Values of community volunteers

The values inherent in the community volunteers that influenced them to volunteer during the pandemic are the Bayanihan spirit, optimism, and selflessness. The Bayanihan spirit of Filipinos propelled the volunteers to offer their services for free and not count the cost just to make the relief assistance operation successful despite the pandemic. It encouraged them to show love to their country and fellowmen, that as Filipinos, we heal as one. Most of the volunteers offered manual labor or help, which left them, tired at the end of the day. However, they still manage to come back the following day to help in the repacking of goods, carrying and transporting the sacks, etc. Since the meals for the volunteers are not included in the budget, they just rely on food donations from concerned citizens, or their family members. A few even confessed that they sometimes skipped lunch when there is no available food. The responses are shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Values of Community Volunteers

Pseudonyms	Responses	Values
Bella	*Together with the other volunteers we worked as one community even if we do not know each other so much.*	Bayanihan (solidarity)
Carina	*Regardless of age, we voluntarily worked as one.*	
Jessa	*We volunteered together with the same aim to help others in need.*	
Ian	*We did not expect compensation since we volunteered. We did it freely.*	
Fara	*It felt so satisfying and I felt like I am a real frontliner. I also felt like a hero in my little way. I will volunteer again.*	Optimism
Aiza	*I felt accomplished as a volunteer since it felt great to help even in the simplest way you can. I know that our efforts were not put to waste during the pandemic.*	
Lady	*I felt so satisfied and blessed in a way that I have the opportunity to help people in need. Seeing those smiles and gratified hearts made our efforts well paid off.*	
Kent	*Even we did not have snacks and often went hungry because of the many tasks to do, but we did not complain.*	Selflessness
Tina	*Even as an LGBTQ, I carried heavy sacks of food packs to the truck for distribution. Of course, I was strong and willing to do it.*	
Queenie	*We did not go home until the tasks were done. We went home late at night, but happy.*	
Dina	*I was afraid to be contaminated with the virus but I knew that God will protect us. So, I continued to volunteer.*	
Edgar	*I had to walk home because there was no transportation due to the lockdown but it was okay for me.*	

Note. These are the verbatim responses of the participants and the emerging values. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities

Likewise, optimism is also a value that influenced many of the volunteers to have a positive mindset. Some even believed that volunteering will add to their learning and enable them to be more patient and understanding of others. As the volunteers became more optimistic with their volunteer work, they also felt happiness and satisfaction that they were doing the right thing.

Furthermore, another value that emerged among volunteers is selflessness. The volunteers expressed that care and compassion for others are in their minds every time they experienced difficulties during volunteer work. They knew that everyone is having a hard time adjusting to the changes brought by the pandemic and they wanted to help others. Despite the fear of getting the virus during this time, they continue to help in the relief assistance operation. Many of them even went home late in the evening since they had to expedite the repacking of goods to be distributed to the barangays the following day. Some have to walk in going home since there was no public transportation available during ECQ. Some also endured hunger since they had no budget for snacks and meals. Whatever food was given to them by donors was shared with their fellow volunteers. Putting their wants and needs aside had contributed to their change of perspectives as they realized that volunteering gives a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction, even if their efforts are not tangibly recognized.

Many of the volunteers experienced changes in personal perspectives and outlook on life. Some of them gained self-confidence and self-worth since it has been proven through personal experience that no matter how low your position in society, you can still contribute in your little ways. Some volunteers learned to stretch their patience and understanding towards co-volunteers and even the personnel of government agencies by recognizing and accepting individual differences. Most of them were able to learn and apply good time management and teamwork during the volunteering process.

4.2. Discussion

This study explored the lived experiences of community volunteers in the relief assistance operations during the enhanced quarantine period during the Covid-19 outbreak.

4.2.1. Reasons for volunteering

The key themes about the reasons for volunteering that arose from the study are social responsibility, ease of boredom, and friendship network. Social responsibility and the desire to help others are often the reasons why people volunteer, whether as individuals or in organizations. The same findings were reflected in the study of Saha (2020), Mak and Fancourt (2022). In a study by Tong et al. (2021), volunteers expressed a strong desire to help those who were greatly affected by the pandemic. Although many felt moral distress and emotional burden, the ability to help others soon outweighed all of these.

Intrinsically motivated, the volunteers show altruism in helping others. Deocaris et al. (2015), in their study on volunteerism among college students, volunteerism has become a meaningful activity as a basic expression of human behavior arising from a tradition of sharing and reciprocal exchanges across all ages. As can be gleaned from the profile of the volunteers, their ages and professions vary. Despite this, they have the same motivation to serve others in need without payment and recognition. Akin to this is the study of Castillo and Dela Cruz (2022), affirming that the desire to help transcends volunteers' age, civil status, and educational attainment.

It is a reality that within weeks of staying at home and suspension of work, the pandemic has caused boredom and the volunteers were able to overcome this by going to the evacuation

center every day where the relief assistance operation is situated. These findings may be novel and unique since the lockdown and quarantine protocols only came into implementation during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, ease from boredom can rarely be found as a reason for volunteering. The friendship that brings happiness and satisfaction was also found by the volunteers during the volunteering process. These feelings of satisfaction and happiness are also found in other studies on volunteers. Volunteers became happier and more thankful as they learn new things during the volunteering process (Arafah & Setiyawati, 2020) and had a positive impact on their lives (Biddle & Gray, 2020). Individuals who volunteered as part of the group hold more positive attitudes toward charitable organizations and the volunteering process (Zboja et al., 2020).

4.2.2. Values acquired by volunteers

Values that bind the people in the community emerged despite the pandemic. The common values inherent in the community volunteers are Bayanihan (solidarity), optimism, and selflessness. The *Bayanihan* spirit of Filipinos propelled the volunteers to offer their services for free and not count the cost. *Bayanihan* is a Filipino term that originates from *bayan* (nation), and *bayani* (hero) and a term denoting mutual help and concern for others (Ang, 1979). This is also referred to as a spontaneous but organized assistance to a community member in need, which is ingrained in the Filipino traditions (Deocaris et al., 2015). Love for the nation and fulfillment of one's duty towards the country is also one of the great motivations to volunteer (Sengupta & Al-Khalifa, 2022).

Optimism and having a good mindset enabled them to continue the volunteer work and feel fulfilled after. Selflessness propels them to set aside their wants and feelings just to render voluntary service in the relief assistance operations. They felt that they could show a good example and inspiration to others. Similar findings were also seen in the study of Arafah and Setiyawati (2020), where several values enabled volunteers to do the act of volunteering, and these are spirituality, concern for others, and having a social spirit. These reasons assist them in carrying out volunteer tasks as well as learn to reflect on their life

5. Conclusions & recommendations

The study sheds light on what is happening at the ground level of community volunteerism, as it also brings into focus the emerging values of a community despite the pandemic. Volunteering plays a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, addressing urgent needs, and strengthening resilience within communities. People engage in volunteer work for various reasons, including a sense of social responsibility, personal motivation, and the desire to work with others. However, despite the positive impact of volunteering, it is not without challenges. Volunteers often face difficulties such as a lack of resources, emotional and physical exhaustion, exposure to risks, and, at times, inadequate recognition for their efforts. These challenges highlight the need for proper support systems, including training, logistical assistance, and psychological support, to sustain volunteerism in the long run.

Furthermore, the experiences of community volunteer work, which may sometimes be taken for granted, have portrayed a picture of importance and relevance during a pandemic or any emergency crisis. Volunteers serve as frontline responders, bridging gaps in service delivery and ensuring that aid reaches those who need it most. Their dedication underscores essential values such as *Bayanihan* (solidarity), optimism, and selflessness, which become even more evident in times of crisis. These values not only strengthen individuals but also build a more unified and responsive community.

Hence, community volunteers must be given appropriate support and logistics to enhance their effectiveness and sustain their engagement. Recognizing their contributions through incentives, appreciation programs, or awards can serve as motivation for continued service and inspire others to take part in volunteer work. Moreover, local government units or agencies may formulate a structured mechanism for recruiting, organizing, and training community volunteers, ensuring that they are well-prepared to respond efficiently during pandemics, national crises, or emergencies. By institutionalizing volunteer programs, communities can build a culture of service, preparedness, and collective responsibility, ultimately leading to stronger and more resilient societies.

Academic institutions, non-government organizations, and private entities may also organize a pool of volunteers that may assist in any government programs, especially during a pandemic or national crisis. A database of community volunteers may be created for referencing and monitoring. Since the study is limited to respondents and certain aspects, other researchers on the socio-demographic variables of volunteers, the coordination system among volunteers, the interdependence of volunteers and government agencies, NGOs, and private entities may be conducted in the future.

SCIENTIFIC CONTRIBUTION

The manuscript clearly identifies a research gap; the manuscript extends and refines existing theories; the manuscript presents statistically and practically significant findings; the manuscript offers policy/managerial/technological implications; the manuscript opens new directions for further research.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

CRediT: **Ma. Sarah Fatima P. Valencia**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Validation, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Resources, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing, Project Administration.

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