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Editorial

The pursuit of knowledge promises no end. Humans, gifted with intellect and curiosity, will remain interested in discovery, argumentation, and invention. This, of course, is as it should be. At the core of our nature as sentient entities is a sense of wonder at the possibility of new insights and a sense of delight in encountering new ideas, even if these are mere footnotes to the existing pool of knowledge. To use Rahnerian and Kantian phraseology, as *Geist in Welt* with transcendental capacities at the ontological depths of our being, we, humans, are questioners forever moving forward toward experiencing cognitive satisfaction.

It would not be an exaggeration to claim that in the pursuit of knowledge there are no irrelevant questions. Answers to basic questions become the ground for further inquiry, which in turn lead to further answers. Scholars, however, must possess the needed humility to admit the possibility of the provisionality of their discovery and proposed answers. This neither implies a callous deprivation of the excitement of having discovered something new nor an insensitive undermining of the significance of new insights. It only means that our contributions to knowledge—no matter how great we perceive they might be—are not conclusions of the matter. Instead, they serve as grounds for further inquiry for others. Our insights are wheels within the bigger wheel of scientific inquiry.

My deep appreciation goes to those who untiringly raise questions, willfully engage in the discovery of new ideas, and courageously publish their arguments. They, as persons in themselves, along with their contributed new knowledge, are magnificent gifts to humanity and to world progress. These gifts of knowledge are born out of many sacrifices, including time and resources which could have been spent on things that bring momentary enjoyment. I thank them also for giving *Wesleyan Scientific Review* the privilege of being the channel of their gifts to the world.

Soli Deo gloriam!

DICK O. EUGENIO, PhD
Editor-in-Chief



TABLE OF CONTENTS

God, the Absolute Thou as the Ground of Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel <i>Blessildo G. Dagsen</i>	114
Students' Mental Health Concerns Amidst Their Academic Difficulties During Pandemic <i>Tita C. Agsunod, Jamaica J. Duldulao, and Venus A. Vitales</i>	128
Spiritual Palliative Care for Religious Asians <i>Dick O. Eugenio</i>	145
Implementing Ethics in Research During Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry <i>Glenn A. Guira, Roseli T. Aurelio, Wilfredo C. Ramos, Carissa D. Balaria, and Marites C. Pagdilao</i>	160
Guide to Authors	172



God, the Absolute Thou as the Ground of Intersubjectivity in the Philosophy of Gabriel Marcel

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Abstract

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The present time increasingly shows an intense polarity between science and religion. Human persons' dependency on science and technology and their assertion of autonomy upon themselves get deeper in the heart of society. Ironically, the more human persons become self-governing and self-sufficient, the more they experience a sense of loss of meaning of what it means to be human. Human persons perceived chiefly as a scientific and technological problem can only lead to alienation and isolation from others. The abolishment of the absolutes grants human persons their insistence as the definer of reality. And with science and technology as their tools, they have created a world that has lost its ontological awareness. This article argues that God, the Absolute Thou, is the ground of intersubjectivity using Marcelian philosophy. It uses both expository and correlational methods to establish the nature and significance of the reciprocal relationship between intersubjectivity and the Absolute Thou. Gabriel Marcel's existential ontology reveals human persons with the exigence of being. Central to Marcel's intersubjectivity are three inseparable pillars of love, fidelity, and hope that characterize openness, community, unconditionality, and eternity. Intrinsic to these pillars is theocentric directedness. Through Marcel's non-objective approach to God, the Absolute Thou breaks free from the presentation as an abstract entity. Thus, God can be experienced through personal involvement by way of faith, love, and hope. The study shows the centrality of God, who can fulfill the human persons' exigence of being, and only in God, the Absolute Thou can love, fidelity, and hope have their full assurance and eternal significance.

Keywords: God, Absolute Thou, Intersubjectivity, Marcel, Ground



Introduction

Richard Dawkins (2006), Oxford zoologist and renowned atheist who continuously mocks religion, asserts in his book *The God Delusion* that the notion of God is a virus in the mind that needs to be expunged. On the other hand, atheism is evidence of a freed and healthy mind. He also adds that religion is an irrational superstition while science is rational and based on evidence. Nowadays, many people are more dependent upon science and technology for answers to the problems they are facing. As columnist Trevor Thomas (2013, para.7) notes, “we get the motto of the technocrats: ‘only science can save us now.’ Whether it is global warming, stem-cell research, the beginning of life, health care, crime, homosexuality, gun control, or economic policies, the technocrats have the answers.” In their abuse of freedom and obsession for power, human persons enthrone themselves at the center of a completely human universe and subsequently proclaim themselves as the definer of values. Through the assertion of freedom and power upon themselves, human persons are confident that all things are possible and there are no limits to their material possession accumulation. An American academic historian, Howard Zinn, expresses, “people are driven, driven to accumulate, accumulate without even asking the question of will this make me happy or not” (Shadyac, 2011). Barbara Kruger’s famous slogan succinctly conveys this misguided thinking when she writes, “I shop, therefore I am.” The more human persons advance to becoming self-sufficient and self-governing, the more they experience a sense of loss of the meaning of what it means to be human. John Francis, an environmentalist, states, “I found that a lot of people were unhappy even though they seem to have everything. Even though they seem to be doing or believing that American dream” (Shadyac, 2011). V. Langmead Casserley (1956) has rightly said that in defining themselves based on what they have or possess, human persons eventually reduce themselves into an object as “functional agents, welfare units, cannon fodder, party members, anything that is abstract and definable rather than human beings” (p. 90). Moreover, human persons have become alienated or strangers to themselves, but they have also become isolated from others. Esther L. Baraceros (2012), a Filipina columnist, graphically describes:

Absorbed by the sound of their iPod or Mp3s or engrossed in building connections with somebody somewhere through their cellphones, they become oblivious to their surroundings. They regard as essential only those projected in their technological gadgets; un-essential, are those not sensed by them via their computers or cellphones... Making these people seem isolated and holed up in their comfort zones with their digital gadgets intact. Technology breeds citizens who tend to be complacent, individualistic, oblivious, or uncaring. (p. 21)

With science and technology as tools, we have created a world that has lost the awareness of the ontological. We have deprived human persons with intrinsic worth and value - mere



entities. As alluded to above, these can be readily observed nowadays: godlessness, self-centeredness, infidelity, manipulation, technological evil, hopelessness, and disfigurement of relationships. There seems to be a relationship between meaninglessness and the eradication of the concept of God. This question has provoked me for years which has subsequently led me to this study (Dagasen, 2013).

Among the philosophers who protested on the alienation of the human person in the technological age were Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Martin Buber (1878-1965), and Gabriel Marcel (1883-1973). They aimed to restore the ontological weight of human persons. They contended that the human person is not an object or function but essentially a being-with-others (Heidegger, 1962). Through *Dasein*, which means “being there” (which also means human beings or human existence), Heidegger showed that human beings are primordially being-with (*mitsein*) the world. Being-with is an essential element of *Dasein* which means for the sake of others. Being-with is a prerequisite of one’s knowledge of oneself. Being one with others in the world is fundamentally necessary for entering a relationship with others. Thus, one is essentially and inescapably with others. However, while Heidegger establishes the primordial social construct of human persons from the very start, he is confined on the level of the cognitive in pointing out that relations have been already constructed before the concrete. The rejection of the cognitive or *a priori* intersubjectivity paves the way to the search for transcendence and embodiedness of the other.

In the early stage of Being and Nothingness, Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) agrees with Heidegger’s intrinsic intersubjectivity of human persons. For Sartre, human persons’ daily activities project intersubjectivity in their participatory act with other subjects in the society—“even in the absence of an encounter with concrete others” (Zahavi, 2001, p. 156). However, despite this agreement, Sartre’s criticism of Heidegger points to the latter’s failure to capture the human persons’ “original and fundamental relations to others” (Zahavi, 2001, pp. 156-158). To Sartre (1956), there is something more fundamental to the being-with of Heidegger, and that is the being-for-others. Heidegger’s being-with of *Dasein* in the intrinsic and *a priori* sense lacks flesh and blood interaction with others. Sartre’s conception of intersubjectivity is an emphasis on the concrete relations of embodied subjects. He proposes an understanding of the being-for-others in the existential dimension where a substantial encounter is possible. In their efforts to solve the objectification and alienation of the human person, Heidegger’s and Sartre’s intersubjectivity points to alienation. Heidegger projected the human subject’s relations essentially in solitudes. He is trapped in *a priori* structure of relationship with its failure to connect the cognitive constitution with concrete embodiment. As Martin Buber contends, Heidegger fails to break the barrier between the self and the other.

Moreover, Buber (1947) argues that Heidegger’s philosophical secularism abandons the realm of the religious conception of the bond between the self and the absolute, which, to Buber, is “a bond in the real mutual relation of a person with person” (p. 178). While successful in



showing the embodiment of the other, Sartre undermines genuine communion in taking conflict as the essence of intersubjectivity. In Sartre's philosophy, the Transcendent or God is excluded. In this way, human persons become the definers of themselves (Kaufman, 1956).

It seems that there is scarcely a philosopher since the last century until this present time who could provide the resources to deal fruitfully with this specific issue of the absolutes but Gabriel Marcel (1883-1973), a French Christian existentialist philosopher. Marcel proposes intersubjectivity that is based on a theocentric outlook. He takes into account human persons holistically. Human persons are being-with-others in the world, *esse est co-esse*, endowed with the capacity to transcend their condition to reach the fullness of being. His ontological participation comprises three interconnected levels: incarnate subject, subject-others relations, and the transcendent, Absolute Thou. He rescues the ontological weight of the human experience. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Marcel acknowledges the godless condition of humanity. But unlike Nietzsche, who sees the solution in superman, Marcel sees the answer in the real Transcendent, the God who gives meaning and dignity to human existence and fullness in relationships. His search for transcendence begins from the concrete human experience, the subject's personal experience, and in the context of concrete intersubjective relations (Roberts, 1957). It is not only that Marcel affirms all that could be true in Heidegger and Sartre when fighting against solipsism and the alienation of human persons. More importantly, he also discovers deeper into the ontological weight of human reality and shows how intersubjectivity is inseparably grounded in God, the Absolute reality. The basic idea that this study sets out to explore is how the notion of intersubjectivity finds its ground in God, the Absolute Thou.

Absolute Thou Grounds Intersubjectivity in the level of the Exigence of Being

The first task is to show that God, Absolute Thou is the ground of intersubjectivity on the level of exigence of being. Absolute Thou refers to God as an absolute Person and a divine Presence who is relational and experiential. He is referred to this study as the ground of intersubjectivity. Thou refers to a free conscious person with whom one can enter into a genuine personal relationship. Intersubjectivity is openness to others. It is where one stands in a vital relationship with others, one participates in each other's being and experience, which involves a deeper union of experiences such as love, fidelity, and hope. The question of "being" reveals the multi-dimensional aspects of reality that human nature characterizes both the physical world and the spiritual or transcendental dimension wherein the exigence of being, a deep-rooted interior hunger for fullness, is met and fulfilled. Herein, Marcel rejects the separation between the physical and spiritual worlds or the individual and the universal. For Marcel, the spiritual manifests in the physical. Central to the understanding of this union of such two dimensions are human persons revealed in the realm of mystery and in being. (Mystery is an outlook toward a reality that involves the whole human person. It is the opposite of abstraction and is an experience that involves the whole human person. It is where the



dualistic view of life ceases. It reveals the realm of being where the human persons are involved in the intersubjective experience of love, fidelity, friendship, evil, and the like.)

Marcel's philosophy of existence accents human persons because it is only through them that being can be approached. Hence, being and human persons are inseparable as it is only in being that human persons are revealed. The notion of exigence of being elucidates this. For instance, the ontological or metaphysical question, "Who am I?" inextricably involves both the questioner and being. As Marcel (1956) states, "to raise the ontological problem is to raise the question of being as a whole and of oneself seen as a totality" (p. 17). The only way to approach being is through human persons who inquire about being. In this way, according to Marcel, the only deepest ontological or metaphysical question is the question "Who am I?" For Marcel, this exigence of being is an appeal to the foundation of being, the Absolute Thou who alone can answer who human persons are. Marcel (1949) elaborates, "I am led to recognize that the appeal is possible only because deep down in me there is something other than me, something further within me than I am myself—and at once the appeal changes its index" (p. 125). Here the idea of otherness in Marcel's thought emerges again. The question, "who am I" presupposes other persons and God, the Absolute Thou, as the necessary fulfillment of the former.

The otherness revealed in the ontological question elucidates further the inextricability of the physical realm and spiritual realms' inextricability. The relationship between question and answer, the exigence and fulfillment wherein each presupposes the other profoundly shows the serious need of the Absolute Thou in human existence. To Marcel, the exigence of being is a manifestation of the Absolute Thou in the world. Thus, as Sam Keen (1984) observes, the exigence of being might be seen as a philosophical corollary to the Augustinian principle: "That one can only seek God because one already has in some sense found him. The hunger for being is possible only because there is a foretaste, the question of being only because there is some indication of an answer, and the quest for being only because there is blinded intuition" (pp. 107-108).

Hence, the exigence of being posits the necessity of the Absolute Thou in human persons' existence. In the final analysis, the exigence of being is the exigence for God, the Absolute Thou.

Rudolph J. Gerber (1968) elaborates on Marcel's otherness posited in the exigence of being. He gives three reasons why God the Absolute Thou is the necessary explanation to human persons: first, human thought is inadequate in explaining the question, "Who am I?"; second, the mutual relationship and dependence among human persons attest a foundation of personal fulfillment which is not itself inherent and dependent on either, but outside of themselves; and third, human personality reflects the personality of an Absolute Thou as the source of earthly personalities. Dennis Kinlaw (2005), an Old Testament scholar, concurs with Marcel



by saying that human persons are essentially other-oriented and thus find their fulfillment outside of themselves. In his book *Let's start with Jesus: A new way of doing theology*, Kinlaw (2005) elaborates,

No human person is self-originating. The choice to bring each of us into existence was made by two other people, so our life is a gift from others. We begin our life in another.

No human person is ever self-sustaining. We live by that which is not from within us. First, we draw our life from our mother; then we live from our mother's milk; we ultimately live from the bounty of nature, whose elements and richness we take into ourselves, including food, water, oxygen, friendship, encouragement, and inspiration.

No person is self-explanatory. There is no such thing as a typical human being. We come in two editions, and two who are different from each other are needed to explain any one of us. The male finds his definition concerning the female, just as the female finds her identity in terms of differentiation from her sexual opposite. Our biology insists that our completion is in another. Each of us is made for another who is distinct and different. (p. 101)

It is for this incompleteness of the nature of human persons that they are not self-fulfilling as Kinlaw is quick to add, "that we are by definition made for love as that gives itself in trust" (p. 101). Kinlaw moves on to assert, "We need to know the model from which our nature was drawn if we are to find out who we are. That model is the triune Godhead" (p. 78).

In the final analysis, the exigence of being reveals the greatest need of human persons—the exigence of God—a fulfillment in life that brings meaning, value, and healing to the broken world. Broken World is characterized by the technocratization, objectification, and functionalization of the human person in the postmodern world—where "men are not viewed as unique persons but are instead treated solely as objects identifiable with their roles" (Anderson, 1975, p. 40). Because the Absolute Thou is in the realm of mystery and can only be approached through secondary reflection, God is not a piece of information to be discussed. Rather, God is a Person and an absolute Presence. Thus, human persons can only participate in the Absolute Thou. The fulfillment of the exigence of being is in and through participation in the Absolute Thou. It should be clear that there is a reasonable grounding of intersubjectivity in the Absolute Thou in Marcel's philosophy. The most profound quest of understanding oneself and others as the pursuit for fullness is only answered and fulfilled by the Absolute Thou. This exigence of God the Absolute Thou is further shown in the context of love, fidelity, and hope.



Absolute Thou Grounds Intersubjectivity on the level of Love, Fidelity, and Hope

The second and final task is to show how the Absolute Thou is the ground of intersubjectivity through love, faith, and hope where the exigence of being, the need of God the Absolute Thou is attained. The following specific questions need to be answered. What is the connection of the three pillars of intersubjectivity, love, fidelity, and hope to God the Absolute Thou? What is it in love, fidelity, and hope that necessitate the Absolute Thou? In God the Absolute Thou, what is it that serves as guiding principles of love, fidelity, and hope?

Intrinsic to the character of love, fidelity, and hope is the element of unconditionality. Each pillar is discussed separately to show its corresponding guiding principle. The last part indicates the three pillars in a triadic relationship with each other.

Agape as the Guiding Principle of Love

The unconditional demand of love in an I-thou relationship hints at the source of meaning and fulfillment to human love. A vow made, for instance, in a wedding ceremony implies unconditionality if it is meant to be genuine, meaningful, and perpetual: “I shall continue to love you no matter what happens; . . . for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death do us part.” However, the unconditionality of a vow in a purely humanistic setting is unrealizable. The fact that betrayal of commitment is a human possibility proves that human persons themselves cannot be the foundation of their love and unconditional vow. More so, just like the I, the other is subject to death; this shows a limitation that inspires an element of dissatisfaction in human love. As Donald McCarthy (1966) expresses:

When the love of human thou gives me personal meaning, his love does not reach the very depths of my empirical self to know me completely as I am. It remains a particular love, limited in itself, but tending, as my love does also, to a universal communion which exceeds the natural power of any creature whatsoever. Moreover, isn't this other person also subject, like me, to death? What will become of our communion unless it is founded on a more profound Being? (p. 178)

Thus, Marcel proceeds to say that an unconditional vow must be grounded on an infinite reality, God the Absolute Thou, “a being that can assure me that my loved one will always be worthy of my love and that I can always be assisted to be faithful to my commitment” (Anderson, 2006, p. 169). Herein is the core of Marcel’s argument, that the unconditional love presupposed in the I-thou relationship finds justification and consummation on the level of agape or charity. That is to say, charity or *agape* is the guiding principle of the I-thou relationship. Marcel (1962) elaborates”



The more egoistical love is, the more the alluringly prophetic declaration it inspires, and it should be regarded with caution as likely to be contradicted by experience; on the other hand, *the nearer it approaches to true charity, the more the meaning of its declaration is inflected and tends to become full of an unconditional quality which is the very sign of presence* [emphasis added]. (p. 66)

Marcel (1964) further explicates the agapeic love beautifully being the foundation of the I-thou:

It is the dawn of what I have called inter-subjectivity, that is to say, mutual openness. It would be useful to show that this cannot be conveyed in strictly relational language; for from the moment we become presentially aware of one another, we can no longer be considered as two terms external to one another. We are on the verge of becoming interior to one another. But of course, this interiority is only fully realized, that is to say, affected in LOVE or, more precisely, in true AGAPE. (p. 255)

As such, charity or *agape*, the love of God the Absolute Thou, for Marcel, is inextricable from the love of intersubjectivity or I-thou relationship. That is to say, the love of God and the love of human persons are mutual, for the former is the foundation of the latter. Hence, Marcel affirms the two inseparable greatest commandments of the Torah and of the Bible in which the first is the basis of the second: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind;” and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37, 39; Deut 6:6, and Lev 19:18). For Marcel, the love of neighbors and creation is the expression of one’s love for the Creator. It is in the relationship with others and the world that God is glorified. As Marcel (1949) expresses, “My deepest and unshakable conviction . . . is not God’s will at all to be loved by us against the Creation, but rather glorified through the Creation and with the Creation as our starting-point” (p. 135). Hence, with charity or *agape* as a guiding principle of the I-thou relationship, human persons can give a valuable contribution to the community. That is, as Marcel (1951) stresses, “by the radiance of charity and love shining from their being, they add a positive contribution to the invisible work which gives the human adventure the only meaning which can justify it” (p. 45).

In a fascinating conversation with his foremost student Paul Ricoeur, Marcel (1973) speaks movingly about intersubjectivity which true nature is charity or *agape*:

By “life” I mean life with others, reflection about others, personal relationships, about intersubjectivity, which perhaps we haven’t talked enough about and which is nonetheless so essential to me. I think it could be said here that intersubjectivity is openness to the other, and openness which is perpetually threatened because, at every moment, the self may close itself again and become a prisoner of itself, no longer



considering the other except concerning itself. *But the possibility of opening to others (that is, in a completely different language, charity) is one of the key certitudes I have come to. I think that it is on the level of agape, on the level of charity or intersubjectivity, that experience undergoes a certain transformation in that it takes on the value of a test [emphasis added].* (pp. 253-254)

Here emerges a contrast between I-s/he/it relationship and I-thou relationship. As graphic as before, Marcel describes I-s/he/it relationship like a world where the “I” reigns and rules at the expense of others. It is a broken world, a world that is void of love. It is the prison of the self. It is a poverty of the soul that spreads like leprosy, as Marcel describes. In Christian terms, it is a sin, which John Wesley (n.d.) depicts as “chains of iron and fetters of brass. They are wounds wherewith the world, the flesh, and the devil, have gashed and mangled us all over. They are diseases that drink up our blood and spirits, that bring us down to the chambers of the grave” (pp. 218-219).

Marcel’s analysis of the I-s/he/it relationship affirms the universality of sin. However, the I-s/he/it relationship should be seen in the light of the biblical understanding of sin as its framework. This could only be followed by a full discussion of how biblical understanding of sin gives an intelligible framework to Marcel’s I-he/she/it relationship, which is beyond the scope of this study. Kinlaw’s reflection on Marcel shows the connection of the I-s/he/it relationship to the biblical understanding of sin. Kinlaw remarks that Marcel’s “analysis of sin in that passage (to Ricoeur) is a broken relationship—interpersonally not just with the law. It is when a person shuts himself off from another” (Kinlaw, personal communication, August 1, 2012).

Marcel indicates that a solution or cure for the broken world or broken relationship ruined by the I-s/he/it relationship is found beyond the problematic thinking. Unreservedly, Marcel argued that the transformation of broken relationships takes place in intersubjectivity or *agape*. As Marcel (1951) asserts, outside intersubjectivity or charity, it is “impossible to be open to others, to welcome him in the deepest sense of the word, and to become at the same time more accessible to oneself” (p. 10). Regarding the centrality of love, Kinlaw remarks: “Gabriel Marcel has confirmed my belief in the Trinity. He has confirmed my belief of Wesley’s teaching on entire sanctification” (Kinlaw, personal communication, August 1, 2012).

Thus, in his painstaking analysis of human nature, exigence of being, broken world, and intersubjectivity or I-thou relationship, Marcel discovers a ground in which nothing goes higher than charity or *agape*. Wesley (1971) tried to elucidate this agapeic love that Marcel was grasping in his book:

Love is the highest gift of God; humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love . . . It was well you should be thoroughly sensible of this, the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in



religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting out of the royal way . . . if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way and putting them upon a false scent. (p. 99)

Nothing can surpass the level of charity or *agape*—where the transformation of I-s/he/it relationship to I-thou relationship is only possible—because to Wesley, God is *agape*.

In speaking of intersubjectivity as charity or *agape*, Marcel points to the heart of the Trinity. As George Maloney (2004) observes in his book *Abiding in indwelling in Trinity*, “Gabriel Marcel describes the mystery of true love in the Trinity and our human love relations: “The I is the child of the We” (p. 20). In the same line of thought, Kinlaw comments that Marcel is prying on the doctrine of the Trinity, which is the necessary model in which human nature finds its meaning and fulfillment (Kinlaw, personal communication, August 1, 2012).

Marcel, however, does not fully elaborate agapeic love. This inadequacy in Marcel demands an in-depth exploration of the triune Godhead who models agapeic love. But, perhaps to Marcel, this is beyond philosophical reflection and is proper only for the theologians to discuss. One only needs to explore the context of the triune Godhead to see how the agapeic community in the three Persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) gives the framework to intersubjective or interpersonal relationships, which is beyond the scope of this work. Thus, in affirming that intersubjectivity is nothing but charity or *agape*, Marcel offers a sound argument that human nature cannot escape the infinite Being as the source, the ground, the symphony, and the bond of the I-thou relationship. Moreover, in this inherent orientation of human love to the agapeic love of God, Marcel may be providing the key to help with some biblical and theological accounts.

Faith as the Grounding Principle of Fidelity

The above discussion on *agape* hints at the relationship between fidelity and faith because love and fidelity are inseparable. And so, just as love’s unconditional demand has its full assurance in *agape*, fidelity’s unconditionality is possible in faith. According to Marcel, the unconditional demands or aspiration of fidelity is fully articulated in the religious faith. As Marcel (1962) holds, “Fidelity can never be unconditional except when it is Faith” (p. 133), i.e., such commitment reaches its best explanation when pledged to God the Absolute Thou.

Furthermore, Marcel (1949) says, “faith is essentially fidelity, and in the highest possible form” (p. 22). But as Keen (1984) explains, “fidelity in human relationships is not something added to faith; it is how the believer is faithful to the Absolute Thou” (p. 114). The inseparability of the vertical relationship (faith in God) is obvious from the horizontal relationship (fidelity to others). One’s faith in God assures one’s fidelity to others. As Marcel (1950) elaborates, “the



more we shall put love at the center of our lives, the more certain we shall be that we act according to God's will" (p. 40). Reversely, one's fidelity to others testifies to one's faith in God the Absolute Thou.

I-thou relationship or intersubjectivity, a community-centered agapeic love, has coherence and unity through faith in God the Absolute Thou, the living center of the relationship. It is the Absolute Thou's presence recognized in the love of I-thou relationship that makes love perpetual and fulfilled. It is in faith that fidelity gets strength and constancy in the temporal plane and amid uncertainties.

God the Absolute Thou and Hope

The second link of the grounding of intersubjectivity in the Absolute Thou is the demand for eternity, the indestructibility of love. Marcel's painstaking endeavor to find meaning to intersubjectivity or the I-thou relationship against the sting of death led him to discover the mediating synthesis, the unconditional hope in the ultimate resort, the Absolute Thou. Marcel has made it clear that this justification cannot be done on the level of thought alone; it must utterly include a deep dimension of life if the justification is to be real and not merely an illusion.

Marcel stresses: "thou, at least, shalt not die." This prophetic affirmation and assurance that death is not the cessation of love is the voice of hope that inspires the indestructibility of mutually pledged love. The voice of hope enclosed in the prophetic statement, "thou shalt not die," finds its meaning and justification in the statement, "I hope in Thee for us." Without the "Thee" at the center of the "I" and the "thou," hope is groundless. Such groundless hope thus entails the end of love. Hope, like love and fidelity, is unsustainable in the finite "I" and the "thou" or "us" themselves. Hence, the hope for the "us," this oneness in love between the "I" and the "thou," can only be found in the presence of "Thee," the Absolute Thou. Thus, the eternal character enclosed in love refers back to God, the Absolute Thou, who can only give meaning to the salvific character of hope. The only justification for such a demand for eternity in love is God the Absolute Thou.

Just as charity or *agape* is the guiding principle for love, and faith for fidelity, so hope as inextricable from the Absolute Thou illuminates the true nature of hope. Hope as a radical openness is a recognition of one's exigence of being as exigence for God. Hence, it testifies the centrality of God the Absolute Thou in human existence. And so, as Francis J. Lescoe (1974) remarks:

It is permanently through hope that I discover my relation to the Absolute Thou. Because I realize my complete dependence on this Infinite Being, I am forever protected from despair. I am not tortured by a Heideggerian dread and homelessness;



neither am I overwhelmed by Sartre's absurdity or nausea. I am, in truth, a *homo Viator*, a pilgrim, a wayfarer but not a wanderer of endless and confusing "forest trail." I experience nostalgia for Being and, therefore, I direct my gaze to another life where I shall experience complete fulfillment. (p. 112)

Triadic Relationship of Love, Faith, and Hope

Each of the pillars of intersubjectivity reveals the triadic and indivisible relationship with each other. They all necessitate and have a being beyond the Spatio-temporal dimension, God the Absolute Thou. The prophetic assurance of the eternity of love that lingers amidst the darkness of the broken world, of betrayal, sickness, separation, and slavery is earnestly faith and hope or trust in the power and goodness of God the Absolute Thou. As alluded to, hope inspires the characteristics of love and fidelity. Without hope, love and fidelity, and faith are purposeless. Thus, hope as the life force behind love and fidelity and faith makes hope the final assurance of the grounding of intersubjectivity in the Absolute Thou in Marcel's philosophy. Love and fidelity and faith are the unconditional assurance of the mutual oneness of the I-thou relationship with others and the Absolute Thou. Love as charity and fidelity is the antidote for egocentric living, alienation, detachment, pride, hypocrisy, betrayal, and the cure for the broken world. Hope, however, is the full assurance of the I-thou relationship's mutual oneness not only in the "here are now" but also in the future. In other words, agape and faith are the full assurance of the unconditionality and indestructibility of love. Hope is the full assurance that this indestructibility transcends space and time.

Just as love and faith are inseparable in hoping for the indestructibility of the beloved in the Absolute Thou, love as charity or agape with hope makes hope not self-centered. Hope in agape is always to hope for all of "us," who participate in the journey (Marcel, 1951). What faith does to hope is that it "gives to hope its intelligible framework" (Marcel, 1951, p. 173). Faith in the Absolute Thou that gives the intelligible framework to hope implies life as a divine gift. As Marcel (1951) elaborates, "each of us is in a position to recognize that his essence is a gift—that is not a datum; that he is a gift and that he has no existence at all through himself" (p. 173). That life is a meaningful gift suggests that life has intrinsic worth and life has meaning and a future when the giver of life, God the Absolute Thou, is recognized with deep and wide openness through love, faith, and hope.

However, faith and hope without love beget no relationship at all, as intimate as I-thou. Intersubjectivity as *agape* breaks barriers transforms, renews, and builds a community. It is unselfish, brings fullness, and is irreducible. It aspires to be unconditional and eternal—all these set love as fundamental to fidelity, faith, and hope. Intersubjectivity as *agape* speaks closely to the very nature of God, the Absolute Thou. And so, as the I-thou relationship grows vertically in agapeic love, the more it grows horizontally.



Conclusion

God, the Absolute Thou, is the very essence of intersubjectivity. Because of the unconditional and eternal elements of intersubjectivity, which cannot sustain itself on its own, it has its source in God, the Absolute Thou. Human beings are transformed and enriched in the intersubjective relationship as they find their ultimate consummation of this intimacy in the union with God through love, faith, and hope. It is only in the Absolute Thou, the epicenter and the vital ground of intersubjectivity, that life finds meaning, fulfillment, and eternal value.

Conflict of Interest

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Students' Mental Health Concerns Amidst Their Academic Difficulties During Pandemic

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Abstract

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The mental health of learners is vital in ensuring that they cope and learn in times of pandemic. Currently, the number of people suffering from mental health problems is growing, especially with the global increase of Coronavirus disease cases. The psychological issues due to the pandemic have rapidly compounded the public's health burden (Torales et al., 2020). Several research studies have established the increase in the prevalence of self-reported depressive and anxiety symptoms of individuals due to the Covid-19 disease (Wang, et al., 2020). Barkham's (2019) findings on the challenges of knowledge acquisition caused by mental health issues, and the presence of total physical, mental, and social well-being theory of the World Health Organization (1948) were used as the frameworks of this study, to assess the mental health situations and academic difficulties of learners in times of pandemic. A total of 1,076 elementary to senior high school students, with their parents' consent, from a private university in Cabanatuan City participated in this study. Data gathered through Google form survey were analyzed using weighted mean, ANOVA, and T-test. Results revealed that the respondents experienced mental health concerns brought by the numerous deaths due to the Covid-19 pandemic; anxiety caused by unstable internet connection; fear of not learning using modules; and strict implementation of checkpoints. The students' academic difficulties were due to lack of internet connections; frequent power interruptions; and teachers' inability to foresee the learners' diversity in online learning. A significant difference was established in the mental health concerns of the learners according to their sex, age, and department levels. At the same time, their academic difficulties varied according to their age and department levels. A proposed program was designed as the output of the study.

Keywords: Academic Difficulties, Learning, Mental Health, Pandemic, Students



Introduction

Mental health is the state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her potentials, deals with common life stressors efficiently and effectively, and contributes to his or her community (WHO, 1986). The cases of people suffering from mental health problems are growing, especially with the global increase of cases of Coronavirus disease (COVID-19). The psychological issues brought by the pandemic have rapidly compounded public health around the world (Torales et al., 2020). Learners from various levels were considered the most vulnerable population during the pandemic. Researches have revealed that there is a moderate-to-severe prevalence of probable depression and anxiety symptoms among the population (Wang et al., 2020); thus, to prevent the spread of Covid-19 among the learners, schools were obliged to shift from the traditional face-to-face classroom teaching-learning into flexible and virtual learning set-up. As a consequence, several health concerns emerged among learners, such as anxiety and depression (Wang et al., 2020).

In the USA, the mental health effects of Covid-19 among college students were explored, and it was established that more than 70% of the respondents suffered from the increased occurrence of stress and anxiety (Son et al., 2020). The identified multiple stressors of the students were caused by dread and anxiety regarding their health and other family members. Another interesting result was that 91% of the respondents experienced negative impacts of the pandemic; such as attentiveness snags, sleeping pattern disturbances, diminished social interactions because of social distancing, and greater apprehensions of their academic performance. As for coping strategies, their participants pursued mental health mostly with the support of others.

Another impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in educational sectors was increased anxiety, feeling of loneliness, and depression among students closer to graduating (Lee et al., 2020). Learners reported that worrying about family members' health has an impact on the status of their mental health. Caring for the health of their family members affected their current plans, and they found it tougher to accomplish their studies at home, especially those with stressful family relationships. To manage their anxiety, solitude, and depression, the learners subjected themselves to do physical activities, while others watched television shows or movies while staying at home during the pandemic. For male students who earned minimal income, the pandemic provided them with opportunities to get employed and earn additional income while learning online.

The pandemic has a noteworthy negative influence on college students' mental health (Kecojevic, et al., 2020). College students who exhibited greater academic and life difficulties are particularly vulnerable to higher mental health distress. The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing learner problems. The duration of the pandemic has an impact on the students' academics, lives, and mental health. Thus, college health service providers and



administrators need to consider proactive measures to provide mental health support and to improve the students' well-being (Kecojevic, 2020). In addition, mental health interventions by professionally trained counselors could help students address academic and financial concerns. It is inevitable that during public health emergencies, many students have special needs, and challenges that require responsive programming by colleges arise.

In Nepal, 704 college students of Chitwan Medical College were surveyed using a web-based descriptive cross-sectional survey. The result revealed that 87% of the students were prepared for online classes in times of the pandemic and 88% utilized home internet facilities in their studies (Neupane, et al, 2020). It was revealed that female students' online class readiness is higher than male students; also the online readiness of students with the home internet accessibility is higher compared to students with no home internet connectivity. Meanwhile, readiness for online classes is not significantly associated to their academic programs and years in school.

A study of 3,670 medical students from 54 schools was conducted in the Philippines. Research findings revealed that students, regardless of their geographic location and demographics, experienced online learning difficulties in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their capability to learn online was influenced by various factors such as their sex, year level, age, academic standing, annual income, internet access used, and how many hours they spent online. The identified barriers in online learning were technological, institutional, domestic, individual, and community (Baticulon et al., 2020).

Another study in the Philippines was conducted by Vitales et al., (2021). Results of their study revealed that among the 2,444 students from different levels, private and government schools with varying ages and sex, they considered themselves as physically prepared, but they were not emotionally, psychologically, and financially ready in their learning through virtual classroom. Their profile characteristics were significantly associated with the level of their preparedness and the challenges they experienced in virtual classroom learning. In addition, the challenges they experienced in virtual learning and their readiness in virtual learning are significantly related.

Students' characteristics of online learning readiness are influenced by students' outcomes, according to the study of Joosten and Cusatis (2020). They argued that readiness in online learning arbitrates the associations between resilience in academics and satisfaction in learning online. This means that as academic resilience becomes higher, online learning readiness of the students also increases. As a result, the online learning satisfaction of the students is also enhanced (Kumalasari & Akmal, 2020). Among Malaysian students, their biggest challenge in online learning is internet connectivity. Most learners taking up Diploma courses experienced difficulties in comprehending the content of their lessons (Chung, Subramaniam, & Dass, 2020).



The influence of e-learning and learning readiness on learning interests through learning motivation as intervening variable for flats scholarship students in Surabaya during the Covid-19 pandemic was established by Sari and Trisnawati (2021). It was further revealed that students' interest to learn is associated with their readiness to learn. In the same manner learning interests of the students are related to their motivation to learn, and student learning motivation is associated with the e-learning interest of the students. Finally learning readiness is related to learning interests through student learning motivation.

In terms of the relationship between students' online learning attitudes and online learning readiness, a moderately significant and positive relationship was established by Hergüner, Son, Son, and Dönmez (2020). Learners' online learning attitude has a positive effect on their readiness for online learning. It implies that to provide the learner with decent online learning, it is a need to form a basis for online learning readiness by creating a positive online learning attitude.

A study reported the experiences of students with anxiety symptoms. It was revealed that approximately 25% of the respondents had increased concerns about academic delays, which is associated with the economic effects of the pandemic, and impacts on daily life (Cao et al., 2020). Furthermore, in the survey of YoungMinds, more than 80% of young respondents decided that their pre-existing mental health conditions were worsened by the pandemic. This is mostly because schools were closed, their routine was altered, and social connections became limited (YoungMinds, 2020).

Previous researches reveal that further investigations are still necessary across populations and among different levels of learners. This is to further understand the disturbance of lives and routines of individuals as a result of the coronavirus disease; as well as its association with their mental health concerns. This present study utilized the framework from the study of Barkham et al., (2019), which synthesized that knowledge acquisition at present is very challenging due to "mental health issues," "psychological distress," and "student wellbeing." The notion of healthy well-being in this present study was embedded in the definition of the World Health Organization (WHO) that health is "a state of complete physical, social and mental well-being and not merely the absence of illness or disability (World Health Organization, 1948).

This institutional study's objective was to gauge the present mental health conditions of the learners and make an assessment of the academic difficulties of the learners in a private university in Cabanatuan City. The significant difference in the mental health conditions and academic difficulties of the students was differentiated according to their sex, age, and department levels. As an academic and institutional study, the cooperation and support of students and teachers, particularly those in the elementary and junior high school levels, were sought. The researchers asked their assistance in explaining to the respondents the objective



of the research and to solicit the consent of their parents. The previous studies and researches conducted around the world mostly dealt with college students or those who are in the field of medicine. This study opted to include the younger population of learners. In exploring the mental health concerns and academic difficulties of the students, the researchers aimed to come up with a proposed program that will benefit the learners and which can be adapted by the university in formulating school policies in times of pandemic.

The objectives of the research are:

1. To describe the mental health concerns of the students amidst their academic difficulties during the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. To describe the academic difficulties experienced by the students during the Covid-19 pandemic.
3. To establish the significant difference in the mental health concerns of the students during the Covid-19 pandemic across department, sex, and age.
4. To establish the significant difference in the academic difficulties of the students and the teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic across department, sex, and age.
5. To propose a program for the student's mental health and academic difficulties during the pandemic.

Methods

The present research is an academic and institutional study that utilized a descriptive-comparative design. In principle, descriptive researches do not test specific relationships between factors; however, they provide information about behaviors and attributes to reach a better understanding of a given topic. Studying the respondents in their natural environment and therefore being free from the influence of artificial construct is one of the advantages of descriptive research.

The purpose of descriptive-comparative research is to describe and establish the significant differences of variables in the study. In this study, the mental health concerns and academic difficulties of the students were described according to their age, sex, and department level. Comparative studies examined the comparison between two or more variables instead of establishing the relationships between the variables. In this study, the mental health concerns and academic difficulties of male and female students, elementary, junior high school, and senior high school, as well as the students' age, were compared and tested for significant differences.

Total sampling method was used in this research. After the scheduled data-gathering period, from September 16 to September 24, around 70% of the total population responded to this research. Both the students and the parents were cooperative. They understood the objective



of the research. A total of 1,076 out of the 1,547 total population of the students enrolled in the respondent school answered the survey questionnaire which was sent to them online.

The respondents' and their parents' consent were solicited through the assistance of their class advisers. The purpose of the research was explained to them, and they were informed that data gathered were for research purposes only and that their personal opinions were treated with utmost confidentiality.

The number of participants from each department was distributed as follows: in the elementary department, there were 136 respondents out of the 239 total population; from the junior high school department, a total of 457 students participated out of the 517 total population; and from the senior high school department, a total of 483 students participated out of the 791 total population. In terms of sex characteristics distribution, there are 26 male respondents; and 650 female respondents. In terms of age, the mean of the respondents was 14; 5 years old being the youngest and 22 years old as the oldest.

The items of the survey questionnaire were constructed by the researchers based on information gathered among various students who have experienced alternative learning during the pandemic. The survey questionnaire consisted of 14 Likert-type item statements about mental health concerns and 13 Likert-type item statements for the academic difficulties of the learners. The Likert-type item-statements measured the levels of agreement of the respondents that range from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4).

The survey questionnaire was researcher-made and was subjected to a reliability and validity process. To test the item reliability of the survey questionnaires, it was subjected to Cronbach's alpha reliability test. The questionnaire was first administered to 20 students with comparable characteristics to the actual respondents. The result of the Cronbach's alpha item-reliability test for the 15-item-statements of the Mental Health Concern scale was .895; while the Cronbach's alpha item-reliability test for the 14-item statements of the Academic Difficulty scale was .904, which means that both questionnaires are excellent in measuring the mental health concerns and academic difficulties of the students (George and Mallery, 2003). The same questionnaire was subjected to content and face validity evaluation through the help of colleagues in the academe who were very much familiar with the concepts of mental health and academic difficulties.

The data gathered from the online survey underwent data processing before it was subjected to data analysis using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences. The specific statistical tools utilized in this research were weighted mean and verbal interpretation limits, and Analysis of Variance and One-sample T-test for the significant differences. The result of the statistical analysis was presented in a tabular manner, interpreted, and discussed accordingly. The results



were also used to come up with recommendations and formulation of the proposed programs as the output of this research.

Results and Discussion

1. Mental Health Concerns of the Students during Pandemic

Table 1. Mental Health Concerns of Students during Pandemic

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS		WM	VERBAL DESCRIPTION
1.	I worry about the effects of the pandemic, such as the death of many people	3.38	Strongly Agree
2.	I feel agitated because of unstable internet connections during online class	2.95	Agree
3.	I experienced anxiety while learning during the pandemic	2.72	Agree
4.	I am afraid that I am not learning any lessons during alternative learning	2.68	Agree
5.	I feel anxious because using modules in alternative learning never ensures that students are learning	2.61	Agree
6.	I feel anxious because of the strict implementation of checkpoints	2.55	Agree
7.	I do not feel comfortable with alternative learning	2.41	Disagree
8.	I am afraid of the New Normal of teaching	2.37	Disagree
9.	I worry because I don't hear feedback from my teachers regarding my submitted requirements	2.32	Disagree
10.	I feel anxious because teachers seem to be inconsiderate in giving so many requirements	2.31	Disagree
11.	I feel sad because teachers only give a lot of exercises, assignments, and quiz	2.19	Disagree
12.	I feel anxious because my teachers expect us to be online 24/7	2.04	Disagree
13.	I am worried because our school seems not to care about the mental health of students	2.02	Disagree
14.	I feel bad because my teachers are not good at online teaching	1.70	Strongly Disagree
Pooled Weighted Mean		2.45	Disagree
<i>Limits</i>	<i>Verbal Description</i>		
1.0 to 1.74	Strongly Disagree		
1.75 to 2.49	Disagree		
2.50 to 3.24	Agree		
3.25 to 4.0	Strongly Agree		



The mental health concerns of the respondents were described using weighted mean and verbal descriptions of their responses. The topmost response of the respondents was for the item “I worry about the effects of the pandemic, such as the death of many people” with a weighted mean of 3.38 which signifies their strong agreement. Awareness of what is happening in the country and the world particularly the swelling number of deaths does not necessarily provide positive effects on the mental health of the respondents. More often than not, constantly hearing or reading the news from the television or social media about the increase of death tolls due to the COVID-19 contributed negatively to the mental well-being of the learners. In addition, students who suffered from anxiety during virtual learning became common knowledge. Cao et al. (2020) established that on the pandemic’s psychological impact on college students, approximately 25% of respondents experienced anxiety symptoms.

In addition to the findings on the mentioned mental health concerns of the students in this study, they also agreed that they feel agitated because of unstable internet connection, which is necessary for their online class. They experienced anxiety, were afraid that they are not learning any lessons in alternative learning, and feel anxious in using the modules. The strict implementations of checkpoints around them also gave them anxiety. This finding on the problems about internet connectivity is similar to the condition of Malaysian students which uncovered that the biggest challenge in online learning among college students is internet connectivity (Chung et al., 2020).

In contrast to the above mental health concerns of the students, they signified their strong disagreement that their teachers are not good in online teaching, with a weighted mean of 1.70. This means that the teachers in the sample private schools are equipped well in their task of teaching the students using alternative learning strategies. Prior to the implementation of the alternative teaching-learning in the respondent school, various webinars and training were provided to the teachers wherein they were taught to innovate in their online or alternative teaching. In the study made by Dhawan (2020), he asserted that during pandemic the growth of teachers’ knowledge in EdTech is vital; as it was proven in their analysis employing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges (SWOC). Because most of the teachers in the sample school are graduates of Education degree, they have learned various teaching techniques in their EdTech subject during college. The pooled weighted mean of 2.45 indicates that there are more items in the mental health concern scale that the respondents disagreed with compared to the items where they agreed that they experienced mental health concerns during the pandemic.



2. Academic Difficulties Experienced by the students during Pandemic

Table 2. Academic Difficulties of the Students during Pandemic

ACADEMIC DIFFICULTIES	WM	VERBAL DESCRIPTION
1. I encountered difficulties in internet connections at home	3.01	Agree
2. I experienced difficulty in alternative learning because of frequent power interruptions	2.57	Agree
3. I experienced difficulty because my teachers forgot that not all students have the same capabilities and resources	2.50	Agree
4. I experienced that teachers find it difficult to give lectures and discussions in alternative teaching	2.38	Disagree
5. It is difficult to understand whether our school is ready to implement alternative learning	2.36	Disagree
6. I experienced difficulties because the videos presented in an online class are not clear, especially that I am only using a cellphone	2.35	Disagree
7. We have financial difficulties brought about by the alternative learning because of the pandemic	2.30	Disagree
8. It is difficult to do alternative learning because the curriculum is not student-friendly	2.23	Disagree
9. I experienced difficulties in using gadgets in an online class (not familiar with LMS using cellphone/computers)	2.18	Disagree
10. I have difficulties in attending online classes (lack of means/resources)	2.10	Disagree
11. I experienced difficulties due to a lack of computers at home	2.10	Disagree
12. I experienced difficulty because my teachers send activities even if it is not our online class hours	2.10	Disagree
13. We have financial difficulties because of parent's no work no pay situations	2.07	Disagree
Pooled Weighted Mean	2.33	Disagree
Limits	Verbal Description	
1.0 to 1.74	Strongly Disagree	
1.75 to 2.49	Disagree	
2.50 to 3.24	Agree	
3.25 to 4.0	Strongly Agree	

The academic difficulties encountered by the students are as follows: difficulties in internet connections at home, difficulty in alternative learning because of frequent power interruptions, and difficulty because some teachers forget that not all the students have the same capabilities and resources. These findings manifested that the foremost difficulty in alternative learning of the students is internet connectivity at home. In previous related studies conducted specifically in Asian countries, such as Malaysia, Nepal, and the Philippines, they postulated the internet-related concerns of learners. Chung et al. (2020) found out that Malaysian students enrolled in diploma courses' biggest challenge in online learning are internet connectivity, while



preparedness in an online class of students in Nepal was significantly correlated to their internet accessibility (Neupane et al. (2020). The same is true among Filipino students. Included in the problems encountered by students in the study of Baticulon et al. (2020) were the lack of internet access and the number of hours previously spent on online learning. Students from private and public schools in the study of Vitales et al. (2021) asserted that they experienced challenges in virtual classroom learning primarily because of internet connectivity problems.

Another concern of the respondents of this study was having teachers who seem to forget that not all the students have the same capabilities and resources in alternative learning. Such experiences among the students contribute to the academic difficulties of the learners. Wang et al. (2020) said that the shift from traditional face-to-face learning to virtual and flexible learning brought several mental health concerns to the learners, such as anxiety and depressions.

The item with the lowest weighted mean in the academic difficulty scale answered by the respondents was in terms of financial difficulties, with a weighted mean of 2.07. The families of the students were not affected financially because of the pandemic. The pooled weighted mean of the respondents' answers is 2.33, indicating that they disagreed with most of the items of the academic difficulty scale.

3. Significant Difference in the Mental Health Concerns of the Students during the Covid-19 Pandemic across Department Level, Sex, and Age

Table 3. Analysis of Variance for the Significant Difference in the Mental Health Concerns of the Students During Pandemic

		Mean	F-value	Sig.
Sex	Male	2.37	14.756	.000
	Female	2.50		
Age	5 to 11 years old	2.00	62.044	.000
	12 to 15 years old	2.38		
	16 to 22 years old	2.60		
Department Level	Elementary	2.00	83.797	.000
	Junior High School	2.38		
	Senior High School	2.63		

The result of the Analysis of Variance for the differences in the mental health concerns of the students according to their sex, age, and department level established that significant difference existed between the mental health concerns and sex (F-value=14.756); age (F-value=62.044), and department level (F-value=83.787). The significance value for the three variables is .000 which is lower than the significant value of .05.



The computed mean of the response of female students was 2.50, which is higher than the computed mean of the male respondents, which is 2.37. This is an indication that female students experienced mental health concerns while the male students rarely or did not experience mental health concerns during the pandemic. The observation is the same for the age and department level of the students. Students who are 16 to 22 years old or those who are mostly in senior high school obtained a higher computed mean of their response compared to younger students or those who are in elementary and junior high school level. These results clearly show that older students experienced mental health concerns while their younger counterparts did not experience mental health concerns in their alternative learning. This result is supported by the study of Baticulon et al. (2020), who stated that profile of learners such as their age, year level, gender, annual income, academic standing, number of hours previously spent on online learning, and type of internet access affected their insight regarding their capacity to learn online. The same is true in the study of Vitales et al. (2021), which revealed the significant difference between the learners' profile variables and preparedness as well as the challenges they experienced in learning in their virtual classroom.

Furthermore, the significant difference in the mental health concerns of the students is a confirmation of the previous researches of Torales et al. (2020), who expressed the rapid increase of psychological concerns among the population during the pandemic. This is evident in the increase from moderate to severe levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms as mental health issues of many individuals (Wang, et al., 2020). Lee et al.'s (2020) study revealed that graduating students faced increased anxiety, feeling of loneliness, and depression.

4. Significant Difference in the Academic Difficulties of the students and the teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic across department, sex, and age.

Table 4. Analysis of Variance for the Significant Difference in the Academic Difficulties of the Students During Pandemic

		Mean	F-value	Sig.
Sex	Male	2.32	.046	.830
	Female	2.33		
Age	5 to 11 years old	1.94	27.353	.000
	12 to 15 years old	2.32		
	16 to 22 years old	2.34		
Department Level	Elementary	1.94	39.857	.000
	Junior High School	2.33		
	Senior High School	2.44		

The Analysis of Variance result and one-sample t-test for the significant difference in the academic difficulties of the students according to their alternative learning showed that



significant difference was established between the academic difficulties of the students and their age (F-value=27.353) and department level (F-value=39.857). The computed significance value for both age and department level is .000 which is lower than .05.

The computed mean of the responses of students who are 16 to 22 years old and who are in the senior high school department is higher compared to the computed mean of the responses of the 5 to 11 years old and 12 to 15 years old; as well as students in the elementary and junior high school levels. In contrast, no significant difference was established in the academic difficulties of male and female students. Baticulon et al. (2020) expressed the same observation when they found out that among the profile characteristics that affect online learning of the students included age and year level. The same observation is true in the research conducted by Vitales et al. (2021) on academic challenges. This finding on the significant difference in the academic difficulties of the students and their age and department level coincide with the framework utilized in this research, based on the research of Barkham et al. (2019). It proposed that knowledge acquisition among present-day learners underwent several challenges, which included mental health issues, psychological distress, and student well-being.

5. Proposed Program for the students' Mental Health and Academic Difficulties during Pandemic

Identified Mental Health Concerns	Objectives	Specific Activities	Person/s Involved	Expected Outcomes
1. Students are worried about the many death tolls of people as a result of the pandemic	To minimize the anxiety experienced by the students due to the news about the death toll due to the coronavirus disease pandemic	Educate the students that there are always two sides to the story; despite the death tolls, there are also a number of people who recovered and survived the Covid-19 Include in their lessons alternative activities (compilation of positive news about Covid-19 recoveries) that will avert their attention on the negative news about the Covid-19 pandemic Utilize the result of the survey to devise a plan	School/ Department, Parents, Teachers, and Students	Students who are oriented not to focus on the death tolls of the pandemic avoid the anxiety that they experience



	To conduct a random survey regarding the students' frequency of access to news/social media to monitor death tolls of the pandemic	that will reduce their access to news/social media that leads them to news about death tolls		
2. Unstable internet connections during online classes caused anxiety among students	To lessen the anxiety of students caused by unstable internet connection To provide alternative means of learning online and lessen the conduct of synchronous learning that	Self-paced learning may be introduced among the students to lessen the burden of disrupted synchronous learning due to unstable internet connections	School/ Department, Parents, Teachers, and Students	Better internet connectivity for online learners and teachers in the province
3. Online learning anxiety experience of the students during pandemic / Fear that they are not learning the lessons in alternative teaching/ Anxiety caused by the use of modules as an alternative learning strategy	To conduct a timely evaluation on the learning outcomes of the students after engaging them in alternative learning To gauge the cause/reason of the students' anxiety about not learning in alternative teaching and use of modules	The result of the evaluation can be used to design a mental health program that will alleviate the anxiety experienced by the students in alternative learning during the pandemic	School/ Department, Parents, Teachers, Guidance Counselors, and Students	Students with minimal anxiety because of online learning during the pandemic
4. Anxiety caused by the strict implementation of checkpoints	To orient the students regarding the purpose of safety protocols necessary during the pandemic, such as maintaining checkpoints	Conduct webinars for the students to learn the necessity of safety protocols during the pandemic	School Department, Parents, Teachers, Students, Government agencies (DOH, DILG, BFP, etc)	Well-informed students on the importance of observing health protocols; that it should not negatively affect their mental health
Academic Difficulties of the Students	Objectives	Specific Activities	Person/s Involved	Expected Outcomes



<p>1. Difficulty in internet connections at home</p>	<p>To remedy the academic difficulty of the students due to internet connection problems at home</p>	<p>Collaborate with LGUs to find out if there are government programs that aim to improve internet connectivity in the province.</p> <p>The result of this research may be used as support to necessary local ordinances that will allow the installation of cell sites in areas with low internet connectivity</p>	<p>LGUs, school administrators, researchers, teachers, parents, and students</p>	<p>Better internet connectivity for online learners and teachers in the province</p>
<p>2. Difficulty in learning online because of frequent power interruptions</p>	<p>To lessen the difficulty of the students in online learning due to frequent power interruptions</p>	<p>Provide flexible online learning schedules. If there are scheduled power interruptions, allow the students to have asynchronous learning, such as recorded lessons, which they can watch anytime</p>	<p>School Principal, Teachers, Students</p>	<p>Minimized students difficulty due to frequent power interruptions</p>
<p>3. Difficulty with teachers who forget that not all the students have the same capabilities and resources</p>	<p>To re-orient the teachers regarding the diversity of students in terms of capabilities and resources</p> <p>To lessen the academic difficulty of students in terms of having teachers who forget that students vary in terms of capabilities and resources</p>	<p>Teachers should assess the learning capabilities and resources of the students before implementing their alternative teaching programs</p>	<p>School Principal, Teachers, Students</p>	<p>Teachers who are well-oriented regarding learners' diversity</p> <p>Lessen the academic difficulty of students in learning online caused by teachers' inability to foresee learners' diversity</p>



Conclusions

The result of the study leads the investigators to conclude that the student-respondents experienced mental health concerns brought about by the following: the numerous deaths of many people because of the COVID-19 pandemic, unstable internet connection, fear that they are not learning in alternative learning, especially by just answering modules; and strict implementation of checkpoints. Their academic difficulties were mainly due to lack of internet connections at home, frequent power interruptions in their area, and some of their teachers being insensitive to the differences in capabilities and resources of students for online learning.

A significant difference was also established in the mental health concerns of the learners and their sex, age, and department levels. Female students who were 16 to 22 years old and who belonged to the senior high school department experienced mental health concerns during the pandemic. Academic difficulties varied according to age and department levels. Students whose ages were 16 to 22 years and from the senior high school department experienced more academic difficulties compared to the younger level of students.

Conflict of Interest

This research was not funded by any organization. Hence, there is no conflict of interest.

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Spiritual Palliative Care for Religious Asians

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Abstract

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Although the so-called “believing without belonging” phenomenon is increasingly becoming the religious stance in the world, Asians are still deeply religious in nature. Deep-seated faith commitments affect people’s perceptions of life’s various circumstances. When it comes to the experience of pain and suffering, widely known studies have already concluded the paradoxical effect of religion as either stress-buffering or anxiety-inducing, depending on the hermeneutical leaning of patients. Whatever the case may be, in addition to addressing their physical pain, palliative care providers need to consider the psychological, existential, and spiritual anxieties of suffering people. Holistic palliative care is needed to address “total pain.” To accomplish this, care providers need to be aware of what their Asian patients think about pain and suffering, their psychological struggles, their existential anxieties, and what considerations they are taking in deciding the nature and level of treatment they wish to receive. This calls for an interdisciplinary approach to palliative care, especially between medical sciences and religious studies. Although the reality of the plurality of religions in Asia entails a multiplicity of religious views, there are common perceptions shared by Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam. Knowledge of these dominant themes will help care providers become more effective in dealing with suffering patients.

Keywords

palliative care, pain, suffering, Asian religions, spiritual care, interdisciplinary



Introduction

Since the inauguration of palliative care in the mid-nineteenth century through the work of Cicely Saunders, the principle of caring for ailing patients in medical facilities has been widely adopted as an integral part of the medical profession. Various advocates of modern hospice care, such as Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and Balfour Mount in the third quarter of the twentieth century, solidified its importance in medical practice. With the support of major players such as the Institute of Medicine, the American Board of Medical Specialties and the Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education officially recognized Hospice and Palliative Medicine as a medical subdiscipline in 2006.

However, because palliative care has a very short history as a medical specialty, it still has a lot of room for improvement, particularly in providing a whole-rounded approach to the alleviation of suffering. Since Saunders was a professing Christian, the origin of palliative care is indubitably heavily influenced by Christian values. However, as history progressed, much of the spiritual aspects have been marginalized—intentionally or unintentionally—in medical theories and practices. Anti-Christian sentiments aggressively promulgated by influential personalities such as Sigmund Freud in psychoanalysis certainly influenced ensuing medical bias, leading to preferences toward naturalistic palliative measures before the turn of the century. Freud preferred the use of “intoxicating substances” (Clack, 2014, p. 33). In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud (2001) even quoted Wilhelm Busch’s famous aphorism, “*Wer Sorgen hat, hat auch Likör*,” or “he who has cares has liquor” (p. 75). His preference for the use of narcotics in pain management is further exhibited in his study on cocaine and its anti-depressant effects. His addiction to cigar—or nicotine—may have eschewed his views also. Moreover, his purely physicalist understanding of suffering as “nothing else than sensation” (Freud, 2001, p. 78) led him to conclude that it can easily be regulated: “With the help of this ‘drowner of cares’ one can at any time withdraw from the pressure of reality and find refuge in a world of one’s own with better conditions of sensibility” (Freud, 2001, p. 78). His assertions have merits if one is only seeking temporary pain alleviation. While narcotics truly have de-numbing effects (from Greek *narkotikos*), at the final analysis, its only accomplishment is to induce temporary amnesia. The defense mechanism only postpones sufferers from facing existential agonies. At a certain point, patients will have to deal with the sense of ontological misalignment plaguing their psyche as a consequence of the suffocating simultaneity of physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual pain.

This article argues that a purely physicalist notion of palliative care is not only insufficient; it also has disastrous consequences, particularly in Asia, where the majority of people are still religious. Sociologists admit that although attendance in religious gatherings has declined; people have not completely abandoned their faith (Berger, 1999). Noting the resurgence of religion in non-Western societies, Harvey Cox rescinded his prophesied secularization of the world (Cox, 1965) in his later publication of *Fire from Heaven* (1995). In his book *The Next*



Christendom, Jenkins (2002) noted the shift from the north to the south in religious influence. This article, thus, seeks to highlight Asians' religious consciousness and how it influences their perception and response to suffering. This will help medical practitioners come to grips with what Saunders termed "total pain," because Asian sufferers grapple both with their bodily ailments and spiritual concerns. If the goal of palliative care is to manage pain and distress, then the medical field in Asia must be sensitive to the multifarious dimensions of the Asian psyche to be effective in fulfilling its important vocation.

Defining Pain and Suffering

The concept of "total pain" is an important consideration because it affects our philosophy, policies, and procedures in pain control and management. To put it succinctly, pain is experienced by the self in the totality of its being. Although the scholastic approach of categorizing pain according to various dimensions is helpful for the sake of understanding nuances, pain must be perceived as the objective feeling of holistic dis-ease, where a specific somatic dysfunction entails the collapse of the whole self's well-being (Clark, 2000). In fact, non-physical agonies—that physical sufferings bring about—that are emotional, psychological, existential, spiritual in nature are more difficult to address. The distinction between pain and suffering proposed by Rattner (2019) is helpful because while pain is easier to manage, suffering easily eludes comprehension and control (Gregory & English, 1999, p. 18). In addition, although suffering is an experience shared by all humanity, when it comes to deep suffering, as existentialist philosophers remind us, we are each quite alone (Reiss, 2000, p. 43). Quoting *Basic Hospice Caregiver Training Course*, Burton (2003) provides a helpful definition of spiritual suffering: "[it] arises when the [patient's] view of [their] spiritual life and [their] experience of life are in a state of mismatch or conflict" (p. 438). In short, the sufferer's interpretation is *the* key factor. As inherently hermeneutical beings, we perceive pain differently from one another. The words of Stoic philosopher Epictetus in the *Enchiridion* are wise: "When you see anyone weeping in grief because his son has gone abroad, or is dead, or because he has suffered in his affairs, be careful that the appearance may not misdirect you. Instead, distinguish within your own mind, and be prepared to say, 'It's not the accident that distresses this person..., it is the judgment which he makes about it.'" Individuality and subjectivity— influenced by culture, environment, upbringing, and religious commitments—affect human reflective conceptualizations.

Anesthetic Role of Religion

The religious diversity in Asia unavoidably results in a multiplicity of interpretations of suffering, but there are common threads among them. What follows are some of the major themes found particularly in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. These four religions were chosen without prejudice to the smaller ones across Asia because these are the biggest in terms of the number of followers. The presentation is important because of three



considerations. First, in a very calculative society such as ours, certain measurable outcomes are expected from our caregivers. Relief of suffering is the vocational obligation of care providers. However, although care providers are expected to successfully relieve their patients' suffering, what exactly are the expectations concerning non-physical suffering? Second, advances in medical technology allow practitioners to perform procedures that may actually run contradictory to patients' worldviews, so just because we can, should we? The prevailing physicalist-naturalistic approach to "medicalize human suffering" (Gozdjak, 2004, p. 206) potentially results in a conflicting sense of satisfaction from receiving somatic pain alleviation while feeling guilty because of violated religious affirmations. The somatic suffering is thus only replaced by another, and probably deadlier, form of suffering. Because of the communal nature of religion in Asia, along with the prevalent honor-shame culture, the psychological agony of having committed something contrary to the expectations of one's social belongingness is probably more permanently damaging to patients (Louie, 2013). Third, in any psycho-somatic support, the principle of participation is crucial. What is the participation of the patient in the courses of palliative action? Do they have the right to deny specific procedures without being misjudged? Rattner (2019) talks about the unfortunate "disciplining of grief" in palliative care (p. 358), where specific narratives are the established norm. The dominant discourse (to use Foucauldian phraseology) then expects and justifies certain ways of doing things (Chambon et al., 1999, p. 160). It also renders the validity of variegated reactions to suffering questionable. So will those who choose atypical courses of palliative action be dismissed simply as stubborn, uncooperative patients?

Suffering as Appropriate Consequence

Major religions tend to teach that human suffering arises because of our own doing. In short, we create our own suffering because we are accountable for our own actions. The principle is that of just retribution. We suffer as a consequence of our past misbehavior, poor judgment, or lack of discipline. Our suffering, thus, is a just consequence that must be wholeheartedly embraced, either for the expiation of guilt or the liberation of the self from its past ties. Hinduism, for instance, believes in the just law of *karma*. One accumulates both *punya* (meritorious karma) and *papa* (demeritorious karma) in one's former existence and enters *samsara* (rebirth) in accordance with the just weight of one's actions or inactions. Because the law of the world dictated that one be born with leprosy, for instance, the afflicted person must willingly face the suffering associated with it to conform to justice. Any attempt to alleviate or shorten the suffering results in accumulating more bad karma. Enduring physical suffering, on the other hand, leads to a more fortunate rebirth (Thrane, 2010, pp. 337-342).

Although not as doctrinally and dogmatically emphasized, a similar view may be found in Islam and Christianity. The important common denominator is free will, which may be used or misused to cause suffering to both the moral agents and the people surrounding them. In Islam, when the *nafs amarra* or the lower state of the soul pursues its desires without regard for



consequences, suffering follows naturally (Pimpinella, 2011, p. 73). Physical ailments and suffering exist because we have chosen unhealthy, harmful habits that produce negative short-term or long-term consequences.

Although the official dogma of Christianity does not accept suffering as the manifestation of divine punishment, the thought lingers among Christians, particularly because this element of Jewish faith is found in the judgment of Job's three friends (Job 4:7-8; 8:20; 11:14-17) and the question of Jesus' disciples in John 9:2. There is also biblical support (Genesis 19:1-29; Luke 13:4). The syllogistic reasoning is clear: One suffers because of one's wickedness. Majority of grassroots Christians maintain an enduring affirmation of this view. This has serious ramifications on how sufferers understand their situation. A suffering person with persistent feelings of guilt because of wrongdoing may develop a masochistic tendency to welcome suffering of all kinds and even rejoice in them because of their perceived redemptive value (Rancour-Laferriere, 1995, p. 112). They may choose to refuse narcotic intervention or medical procedures. In Hindu and Buddhist societies, for instance, palliative care may not be desired by patients or recommended by their relatives for fear of either going against the dictates of *karma*. This is because temporary relief might delay or increase the bad *karma* of their loved one, resulting in even more severe suffering in the next rebirth (Pimpinella, 2011, p. 171). True mercy might be seen as allowing the self or others to suffer in the present in exchange for an assured better future.

Que Sera, Sera

Resignation can be a religious response to suffering. Because people must be accountable and responsible for their past actions and accept their current situation, fatalism is not considered as a mindless or self-destructive response; it is perceived as a suitable passivity in the face of justice. Fear of contradicting divine imperative (Islam and Christianity), accumulating more bad karma (Hinduism), or going against established reality may be reasons for a fatalistic response. In Buddhism, suffering is perceived as a natural mark of existence. Buddhism's First Noble Truth states that *dukkha* (suffering) defines human existence, not only because of bad *karma* accumulated throughout past rebirths but also because of human desires and the sorrows brought by changes in our lives (Meghaprasara, 2013, p. 382). So long as earthly existence continues, there will be inevitable suffering. The three marks of existence are interrelated—*anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (suffering), and *anatta* (no-self)—and so long as *anicca* and *anatta* remain, physical, emotional, and mental *dukkha* is humanity's inescapable reality (Thawn, 2020, pp. 39-40). But Buddhism does not end with the recognition of earthly suffering. Buddha reveals a means of escape. Ironically, however, *nirvana* or salvation from the cycle of rebirth and therefore from suffering is an unattainable goal in one's present existence (Maier, 2014, p. 9-42). Relief is available, but one has to wait for its realization in the following rebirth. In the meantime, and closely related to Hinduism, one is called to abandon fleshly pleasures, embrace material destitution, and endure physical suffering. The elimination of



suffering in the future is contingent on one's willingness to embrace suffering in the present (Thera, 2002, p. 49).

Some branches of the Islamic faith have even more passive responses to suffering. The nomadic life of early Muslims, characterized by living under unpredictable and unforeseeable circumstances in the desert, planted an ethos of acceptance of difficulties in the Islamic psyche. Watt (1979) writes: "The fatalism of the nomadic Arab... is not something to be regretted, but a quality which he must have if he is to make a success of life" (p. 9). It must be noted that the word "Islam" literally means "submission," which means that followers of Allah must be ready to submit to divine prerogative. Every experience—including seemingly unfortunate ones—is willed by Allah. The most worshipful response is obedient submission. In the face of suffering, what is required are *sabr*, patience or patient endurance, and *lawakkeul*, trust in Allah and his future deliverance (Watt, 1979, p. 11). This is applied to all misfortunes, including facing opposition from unbelievers, pain because of physical ailments, and all other forms of suffering.

Not My Will, But Thine

Patience as a prescription is grounded in another important element in Asian religions, which is that suffering transpires within the scope of divine providence. Although Hinduism espouses a belief in the universal principle of justice in *karma*, it also believes that its plethora of gods are involved in the affairs of mortals. In animistic societies, fortunes and misfortunes are explained through the existence of benevolent and malevolent gods and spirits that need to be pleased and appeased. Suffering, thus, is not merely a naturalistic consequence of actions toward oneself; it is the prerogative of divine will. This is most explicitly found in Islam as a religion of absolute surrender to the will of Allah in the particularities of human life. In his justice and wisdom, Allah allows suffering to befall his followers as he forges their destiny. Suffering occurs only because Allah permits it, and "he obviously wills it for some reason, either to cure the sinner or to exact reparation for the evil that has been done" (Keating & White, 2009, p. 331). When facing whatever suffering, Muslims encourage each other by saying *Alhamdulillah* ("All praises are due to Allah") or *Insha' Allah* ("Allah willing") or *Masha Allah* ("with the will of Allah") (Akhtar, 2018, p. 15). In addition, a Muslim must not fear suffering as punishment because it is evidence of God's special attention upon a person. During suffering, the ideal is that hope is birthed, and trust in Allah's divine and perfect plan is strengthened (Loufty & Berguno, 2005, pp. 150-151). Because God is involved in either inflicting or allowing suffering, religious adherents believe that suffering serves as a test that will be rewarded when passed. Job's story in the Christian Bible is paradigmatic. His response to his abject predicament serves as the ideal template when one considers divine action in the face of terrible evil: "You are talking like a foolish woman. Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?" (Job 2:10).



Silver Lining

For religious believers, patience is an important virtue because, ultimately, suffering is temporary. It also serves several purposes. First, the acceptance of suffering is evidence of contrition and repentance. Willingness to undergo suffering, especially if it is perceived as just punishment for wrongdoing, is for the soul's eternal benefit: "No fatigue, nor disease, nor sorrow, nor sadness, nor hurt, nor distress befalls a Muslim, even if it were the prick he received from a thorn, but that God expiates some of his sins for that" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 70, Number 545). To undergo suffering, thus, is like going through a ritual of sin-cleansing. Humans have afflictions for their good: "When God intends to do good to somebody, He afflicts him with trials" (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book 70, Number 548). The idea of purification through fire in Christianity resonates with this Islamic view. The Apostle Peter, preaching to Christians facing persecution at the hands of both Jews and Romans, wrote: "In all this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed" (1 Peter 1:7). Overall, the Christian sentiment is that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him" (Romans 8:28).

Second, pain and suffering function as timely warnings that lead believers to moments of self-introspection about their current spiritual condition. Suffering is treated merely as a symptom of an even deeper problem. Without pain and suffering, people will not be given a chance to pause in meaningful religious reflection. In biology, congenial painlessness results in greater bodily tragedies, and most people who don't feel pain die young (Reiss, 2000, p. 41). Pain is "an ingenious system of biological communication without which the quality of our lives would be seriously compromised, even fatally so" (Stackhouse, 1998, p. 61). Since pain brings awareness of an anatomical problem that needs to be addressed, suffering is an indication of a spiritual concern that requires immediate attention. Thus, suffering is an opportunity for growth in religious piety and commitment:

[Rumi] resorts to total submission to the ultimate and solitary source of power, intelligence, enlightenment, creativity, and absolute beauty. He advises yielding to the supreme will that governs the entirety of all that now exists, ever has, or ever will. Submitting to this will and surrendering to the empowering servitude of this power is the only viable course to salvation and the sole straight path to the destination of fulfillment, enlightenment, transcendent consciousness, and sustaining peace. (Akhtar, 2008, p. 52)

Clearly, for religious people, suffering may NOT be a problem that needs to be eased hastily. Facing suffering is meritorious because it provides an avenue for spiritual growth, connection, and transformation (Norris, 2009). Paul writes: "We also glory in our sufferings because we



know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3-4). Even atheistic Buddhism highlights that humanity’s experience of *dukkha* enables us to acknowledge its reality, which then motivates us to determine its causes and pursue liberation. Suffering is an inanimate *guru* that signals a looming threat to our well-being. Fitzpatrick et al. (2016) succinctly express it: “Suffering involves an awareness on our part of a harmony that should exist, whether in our physical or mental being, or our moral being, or between loved ones, or between ourselves and God, and a further awareness that that harmony is currently being damaged, rent asunder” (p. 163). Such an awareness then serves “a salutary role in a moral agent’s life, leading her to repair that which can be repaired, and to develop virtues that are necessary for that reparative work” (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016, p. 163).

For others, suffering provides the necessary impetus for one to reflect on life’s meaning. This is not surprising, because “the problem of suffering is very closely related to the question of human destiny” (Yewangoe, 1987, p. 8). Suffering disturbs routine, creating a pause in the busyness of work and the abuse of the psycho-somatic self, thus allowing a rare moment of serious analysis about what led to the unwelcome disruption and how it may be prevented in the future. In this sense, suffering is the gateway to a therapeutic journey toward self-betterment. It can “force us to confront ultimate issues that normally lie obscured behind our everyday preoccupations” (Stackhouse, 1998, p. 62). It compels people to try to understand the real meaning of free will and its exercise. It serves as a noisy alarm that wakes our slumbering minds regarding our destructive habits. It leads to the recognition of the necessity of life balance. It teaches that meaning is not found in the reckless pursuit of fleshly pleasures. Although suffering is essentially intrusive in a person’s normal state of affairs, suffering is afforded an instrumental value in religious societies.

Addressing Spiritual Pain

In the light of the preceding section, one can foresee the difficulties faced by palliative care providers when dealing with religious people. Diehl (2009) is right: “Since one’s personal sense for the meaning of life is highly individualized, people may cope, react and act in many different, unpredictable and even surprising ways toward any external and personal conditions of human suffering” (pp. 43-44). Because religious Asians attach spiritual significance to suffering, hasty medical intervention and alleviation may be ill-advised because it may be at the expense of robbing the religious person of the opportunity toward spiritual growth (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016, p. 163). Because suffering is embraced as an integral part of human life, which includes one’s spiritual connection with the divine, it can easily be regarded as a momentary life event that needs to be willingly endured, not quickly cured. External help, though well-intentioned, might even be deemed as unwelcome meddling. If not careful, medical practitioners may be indicted as evil witches offering poisoned apples; they give temporary relief for hunger while inadvertently causing long-term damage.



Writing from an agnostic perspective, Clack (2014) is mystified at “the precise location of religion in the typology of palliatives” (p. 59). He asked:

Is it to be classified as one among a number of *powerful deflections* allowing people to make light of misery; as a *substitutive satisfaction* providing a displaced gratification for a thwarted impulse; or as something akin to the *intoxicating substances* that, in one way or another, diminish pain and produce pleasurable sensations? (Clack, 2014, p. 59, italics original)

He then argued, along the lines of Feuerbach, Marx, and Freud, that religion is a human-invented psychological sedative emerging from the combination of a sense of helplessness and wishful thinking. In short, for atheists, religion is an illusion. Nevertheless, Clack acknowledges the role of religion as a palliative, albeit negatively:

Religious belief (in true palliative fashion) relieves pain without curing the underlying problem; such relief comes in a narcotic form since the set of beliefs uniquely offered by religion (the idea of a loving God, the promise of a blissful afterlife) serves to benumb the believer, producing a state of beautiful indifference to one’s suffering and a sense of being at peace with the world. (2014, p. 64)

What may seem all too naturalistic—such as pain and suffering—to areligious scholars and medical practitioners “may be infused with deep meaning, perhaps even to the point of being salvific” for religious people (Henson, 2015, p. 808). Relieving patients’ non-physical suffering is challenging, but may comprise the larger part of the palliative care discourse (Rattner, 2019, p. 358). Care providers simply cannot dismiss the reality that religious consciousness influences how patients make decisions concerning palliative care and its various offers.

One of the key roles of care providers is to give religious people sufficient space that will provide the opportunity for patients to experience holistic redemption. Patients must be involved in the process of taking something chaotic, ugly, or unpleasant and placing it into “cordial consent with being-in-general” (Henderson, 2005, p. 42). A growing body of studies has already concluded that meaning-making is the typical response of suffering patients (Mount et al., 2007; Kearsley, 2010; Breaden et al., 2012). This means that sufferers make the best of their circumstances to give them the opportunity to experience personal growth and consequently become resilient. The obverse implication is that if care providers are unable to facilitate meaning-making or disrupt the process, the available opportunity for growth and resilience disperses too. Care providers, therefore, have a huge responsibility. Their sensitivity to non-physical suffering and their patients’ religious commitments and unspoken psycho-emotional pain is crucial. Burton (2003) is correct: “An assessment of spiritual pain will have to depend at least as much upon the spirituality of the caregiver, and upon their capacity for contemplation, for close listening to the narrative, for intuition, and discernment” (p. 442).



The level of religious commitment of patients affects how they respond to pain in general. The study of Dezutter et al. (2010) concluded that the centrality of the religious meaning system is a key element in how people respond to suffering. Other previous studies agree. Belief in a higher power aids sufferers to cope with life's challenges and gives them purpose and meaning (Princeton Religious Research Center 2000; Greenfield et al., 2009). In fact, as Dezutter et al. (2010) concluded, "when the religious meaning system was reported as being not central to one's life, pain severity compromised life satisfaction ratings. Conversely, the life satisfaction ratings of patients who reported a very central religious meaning system were not negatively influenced by higher levels of pain" (p. 513). Strong religious belief, in short, buffers stress and feelings of pain and fatigue to a significant degree (Baetz & Bowen, 2008). In the appraisal process of their current predicament, religious beliefs help patients reframe their experience of suffering (Park, 2007). What one believes about the nature of suffering, its relation to the divine, and its potential outcome are crucial in the patients' adjustments. Negative perceptions about pain lead to a poor psychological adjustment to pain, while positive perceptions lead to better adjustment (McParland et al., 2005). Perceptions influence human will, so patients can either suffer terribly in non-physical agonies or embody hopeful resilience (Henderson, 2005, p. 36).

The challenge for care providers is that of determining the level of faith commitment or religiosity of their patients. This is where things become complicated. The observation that religiosity in Western countries has become increasingly personal and detached (Dezutter et al., 2010, p. 509) is also applicable in Asia. This "believing without belonging" phenomenon also characterizes much of our current generation. However, irregular participation in religious rituals and detachment from any recognized religious group does not necessarily imply atheism. People remain committed to their religious beliefs at the deepest level. This is particularly true when they face challenges beyond their control.

Conclusions, Challenges, and Opportunities

The unique circumstance and response of religious people to pain and suffering necessitate a different approach to their palliative care. Naturalistic perspectives that hastily "medicalize human suffering" (Gozdjak, 2004, p. 206) and treat all pain purely as mere physiological phenomena do not do justice to the complexity of the Asian experience. Although indeed, physiological pain troubles everyone and cures are often immediately sought, cultural, relational, and spiritual worldviews deeply entrenched in the Asian psyche might mean that physical pain is the least of their numerous concerns. Quick fixes aimed at pain alleviation, very common in narcotics-based solutions (Stone, 2007), while temporarily helpful, do not necessarily represent the ideal course of intervention for chronic pain or long-term battle with suffering. The longer the suffering is endured, the more patients engage in serious reflection. Although no study has yet been conducted on the length of time before patients come to grips with their personal situation, it cannot be that long from the first onset of symptoms of illness.



As such, the longer the sickness has been ongoing, the more the necessity of holistic care becomes apparent.

A caveat must be mentioned. Not all religious adherents respond positively to suffering. The possibility that possessing deep religious commitments may actually bring greater spiritual suffering to patients cannot be dismissed. If Burton (2003, p. 438) is correct that spiritual suffering “arises when the [patient’s] view of [their] spiritual life and [their] experience of life are in a state of mismatch or conflict,” then the predicament of the patient may actually induce deep religious and existential questions. In particular, the actual experience of genuine debilitating pain leads to serious doubts concerning the existence of an omnipotent and all-good deity. Saunders asserted the reality of spiritual pain among suffering patients. Prolonged sickness leads to anxiety and other negative sentiments such as “bitter anger at the unfairness of what is happening, and at much of what has gone before, and above all a desolate feeling of meaninglessness” (Saunders, 2006, p. 218; Ásgeirsdóttir et al., 2014a, p. 6).

Spiritual suffering is characterized by “constant and chronic pain; withdrawal or isolation from spiritual support systems; conflict with family members, friends, or support staff; anxiety, fear, or mistrust of family, physicians, and hospice staff; anger; depression; self-loathing; hopelessness; feelings of failure in respect of one’s life; lack of sense of humor; unforgiveness; despair; and fear/dread” (Burton, 2003, 439). All these points to what Kissane et al., (2001) refer to as “demoralization syndrome” in which patients exposed to prolonged pain and suffering experience “the loss of meaning, purpose, and hope that sustains the will to live or the loss of any potential for future joy” (Kissane, 2012, p. 1504). This is a major problem for care providers because even routine responsibilities like administering medicines and other forms of sustenance become increasingly challenging. It is also at this point that medical practitioners must recognize that the problem is not merely physiological and that treatments require much more than ingesting drugs and injecting sedatives.

It is here that the marriage between theology and medicine is important because the spiritual component of suffering is given similar attention with the physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Because the whole self and its well-being are threatened, holistic treatment is required. To accomplish this, an interdisciplinary team of care providers is needed (Ásgeirsdóttir et al., 2014b, p. 148). Thankfully, the exploration of the alliance between spirituality and medicine is growing, and researches are being conducted on their complementarity in addressing patients’ needs in hospitals and hospices (Tarumi et al., 2003). This reveals that (1) natural sciences and the medical profession now recognize the limitations of their own fields in addressing the complexity of human experiences; (2) certain resources—human, cognitive, and psychological—may be found outside modern medicine; and (3) charitable openness in dialoguing and collaborating with other fields such as religious/theological studies is an important ingredient of progress towards common goals. Scientism, or “the philosophical notion which refuses to admit the validity of forms of



knowledge other than those of the positive sciences” (Henson, 2015, p. 810), is appropriately losing its ground.

Because the interrelationship between medical science and religion in palliative care is very young, no tested course of action is available to be *the* concrete prescription for all. What we have right now are sporadic studies and assertions, already alluded to in this article, that highlight the importance of sensitivity to emotional, existential, or spiritual distress experienced by ailing patients. It does not matter who addresses these unique dimensions of human need. What is crucial is that they are addressed. There are proposals that the phrase “pastoral care” is too replete with Christian connotations and therefore must be replaced by more neutral terms (Tarumi et al., 2003). After all, the argument goes, not all hospitals have on-call ministers; they may only have areligious personnel who are responsible for the spiritual care of patients. The sharp distinction between the concepts of religion and spirituality must also be revisited (Ásgeirsdóttir et al., 2014b, p. 147) to allow areligious caregivers to offer spiritual care to their patients. While this is not ideal, it at least forces care providers to be holistic in their approach. Otherwise, hospitals will need to hire spiritual caregivers from each of the various religions.

There are limited studies on palliative care of Hindus, Buddhists, and Muslims. Much of the available literature is written from a Christian perspective. Pointed advice available for Christians ministers concerning the task of theology to suffering people (Ásgeirsdóttir et al., 2014b, 162; Weisbrich, 2019) is scarcely found in relation to other religions (Vähäkangas, 2014). This reveals the need for more research studies in this area, which will, in turn, enable medical practitioners to have access to resources that can provide appropriate courses of action when offering assistance to religious patients. Until then, palliative care will remain incapacitated in addressing the complexity of suffering, particularly of Asian patients who are plagued by deep-seated faith commitments and concerns that exacerbate their already debilitating physiological condition.

Conflict of Interest

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Implementing Ethics in Research During Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

It is critical that ethical guidelines specified by ethics review committees be followed while doing research during a pandemic (Yeoh & Shah, 2021). Studies involving humans must be carried out in accordance with the highest ethical standard (International Development Research Center, 2021). The aim of the study is to explore and understand the meaning of participants' lived experiences in conducting research during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's phenomenological approach uncovered participants' description of their lived experiences in the field of conducting research for the advancement of science. It selected twelve participants by purposive selection from the general population. A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect the narratives. Three major themes emerged from the research: Ethics as a Core of Research, Witnessing Ethics as a Synonym for Poor Quality, and Inviolable Protection from Harm. To maintain the consistency and excellence of all research performed during the pandemic, it is recommended that exemplary techniques be established to ensure that all research inquiries are subjected to strict ethical scrutiny.

Keywords

Ethics in Research, College Professors, Lived Experiences, Major Themes, Research Study



Introduction

Undoubtedly, with or without the COVID-19 pandemic, ethics continues to be an important element in conducting research. When it comes to accelerating research that improves people's quality of life, the guiding principles of ethics must always be emphasized (Yeoh & Shah, 2020). Indeed, regardless of the circumstances, the position of ethics must continue to shine, as this will increase the quest for knowledge for a better world. Conducting empirical studies at this time can have unforeseen challenges (Buckle, 2021). The pandemic exacerbated the difficulties even more. However, regardless of the dangers posed by the pandemic, information creation through discoveries of treatments, prevention of diseases, and improved ways of living must (Solbakk et al., 2020) proceed in subservience to ethical principles. In short, constraints imposed by the pandemic provides no justification for lowering ethical standards in any field of inquiry.

In a pandemic, research inquiries are especially valuable for understanding and promoting health and well-being, and mitigating risks among populations. However, the implementation of research studies, as with any social research, demands careful planning and continuous evaluation. Researchers must be prepared for possible hazards and appropriate actions to ensure safe and ethical practices with study participants while promoting the value of research (Newman et al., 2021). Conformity to the necessary standards of scientific investigation is non-negotiable. Researchers must become familiar with various factors that may help them in navigating ethics review processes and making sure that the integrity of their work is not compromised.

There are many reasons why it is important to observe ethical standards in research. First, norms encourage research goals such as awareness, fact, and error avoidance. Prohibitions against fabricating, falsifying, or misrepresenting research results, for example, remind us of the importance of facts-checking in order to reduce errors (Resnik, 2020). Unlike researches performed under normal conditions, studies conducted during a pandemic have unique characteristics. First, most studies are focused on clinical care, and the goal is to provide relief to those affected by the pandemic rather than achieving universal results. Second, research is hampered by a critical shortage of resources and researchers, especially because frontline medical personnel and public health practitioners—who are expected to conduct research—are heavily responsible for patient care (Ma et al., 2020).

The aim of this phenomenological inquiry is to describe the lived experiences of college professors in Philippine higher education institutions who are implementing ethical considerations while conducting research since the COVID-19 pandemic began.



Methodology

The study employed the phenomenological approach developed by Edmund Husserl and expounded by Colaizzi. Phenomenology is qualitative research that focuses on the commonality of the lived experiences within a particular group (Creswell, 2013). The fundamental goal is to arrive at a description of the nature of a particular phenomenon. In this research, the phenomenon is the experiences of participants employing ethics in their research endeavors during the pandemic.

Population and Sampling

The study recruited 12 study participants who were chosen through purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (a) have published at least one research study, (b) doctorate degree holder, (c) with at least ten years of higher education experience, (d) are at least 40 years old, and (e) have signed the informed consent. These criteria were included because they provided the needed evidence to support the themes. At the end of the sampling process, 12 full-time college professors who are teaching in various HEIs in Region I were chosen as samples.

Instrumentation

A semi-structured interview guide was used in the research. The validity index of 4.78 indicated that the instrument is reliable. Given the creative nature of interviewing and the study's purpose of learning as much as possible about the lived experiences of college professors in doing research with ethical care, interviews were well-matched to the study. The researchers were able to acquire information regarding how participants made sense of their life experiences by participating in open dialogues with them.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis, as explained by Wirihana et al. (2018), was used to present the lived experiences of college professors on implementing quality research amidst the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the thematic analysis, various sub-themes or major themes emerged. The analysis process followed the 7 steps of Colaizzi: (1) reading transcription, (2) looking for significant statements, (3) identifying the meanings of the statements, (4) looking for the sub-themes, and (5) distilling the major themes from the narratives of the respondents, (6) member checking or validation, and (7) development of conceptual paradigm.



Ethical Consideration

The researchers provided complete information to the participants who are researchers, such as the purposes of the study, its benefits, and significance for them to make an intelligent decision before they participate. The researchers promoted comfort and ensured only the best for the respondents. Any form of harm and injury were carefully avoided. In conducting the data, the respondents were treated equally. The participants were also accorded courtesy and politeness. Moreover, the identity of the respondents was kept secret; their answers were not divulged in any circumstance.

Results

Based on the stories of the participants, four major themes emerged: (1) Ethics as a Core of Research, (2) Witnessing Poor Research Quality, (3) Protection from Harm is Inviolable, and (4) The Value of Humans. These are presented with the corresponding sub-themes and significant statements, except the fourth. These major themes represent the concerns of the participants. They demonstrate that if not careful, researchers during the pandemic—in any field of inquiry—may compromise the integrity of their research when they cut corners and disregard ethical standards in order to produce a research output.

Ethics as a Core of Research

The first major theme that emerged from the narrations of the participants pertains to ethics being a core of research. This emerged theme is supported by the sub-themes: (a) ethics as a way of life, (b) morality prevails over immorality, and (c) importance of ethics. These sub-themes have overarching commonalities that are categorized as the core of research.

Ethics as a way of life. Integrity in the conduct of research is an underlying value of professional life, especially for a nurse. It is a virtue that is part of the fabric of society and is imbedded in the role of a nurse on any research inquiry (Tsoukas, 2017). In Table 1, these are manifested in the verbalization of participants 1, 4, and 5. Participant 1 considers ethics as part of their considerations, even in the midst of the challenges brought by the pandemic. It would seem that environment and upbringing are key factors, which Participant 4's response insinuate. Because ethical standards and values have been an integral part of our education—both at home and at school—Filipinos have strong ethical foundations built into our psyche. In addition, as Participant 5 added, because ethical standards are expected to be evident in every facet of life, from family life to the workplace and in society, it is not surprising that high ethical standards are also expected in ventures such as in academic pursuits.



Table 1. Excerpts from the Narrations of the Participants

Major Themes	Sub Themes	Participant Code	Sample Significant Statements
ETHICS AS A CORE OF RESEARCH	Ethics is a way of life	1, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is basically part of my role as a professor who conducts research regardless of the worldwide phenomenon ▪ Ethics has been engrained since primary years of education, so it is not difficult to implement ▪ The life of research always involved ethics, so it not difficult to implement
	Morality prevails over immorality	2, 4, 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ It is better to work through the morality of research rather than not doing it. ▪ Like I said, through ethics, my conscience is clear that I am doing the right things ▪ What prevails is moral than immoral and I will continue to advocate it in all my research.
	Importance of ethics is emphasized	3, 6, 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In all our faculty meeting, there is always an agenda on ethics, so this concept continues to linger even if there is a pandemic. ▪ Administration continues to put focus on the use of ethics in research ▪ Professional development courses during webinars are always tackled, so it is important and relevant issue.
WITNESSING POOR RESEARCH QUALITY	Fabrication	1, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Just to submit papers for review, researchers engage in fabrication ▪ It is easy to produce data, anyway, no one can evaluate and observe, there is a need to focus on this behavior. ▪ Faculty research can be produced but data may not be real.
	Plagiarism	3, 4, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Through the internet, discussions are copied without citation. ▪ It is rampant, it is easy to copy ideas of authors. ▪ No turning back, most that I see are intellectual theft of ideas.
	Conflict of Interest	1, 2, 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Advisers are also panelists; this is conflict of interest. One faculty would make research for another faculty for a professional fee ▪ Faculty members wanted to be part of the study of another one who did not participate



<p>PROTECTION FROM HARM IS INVIOLEABLE</p>	<p>Humans are respected and cared for</p>	<p>2, 7, 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ One of the primary issues that need to be handled with extra care are the study participants ▪ Participants are significant part of research; thus, they must be always protected. ▪ Study participants are humans, so at all possible times, they must be protected from any form of harm ▪ The researcher must be certain that possible risks are minimized if not totally eradicated
	<p>Ethical principles are advocated</p>	<p>3, 4, 6, 9</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The informed consent serves as protection to safeguard client’s physical, personal, and social integrity. Participative enough to involve the respondent ▪ As a researcher I must make sure that I should not do any harm to the participant of my study, and it is my responsibility to avoid possible risks upon the subjects of my study. ▪ Anonymity and confidentiality are both an important step to protect their identity and this must be followed all the time.

Morality prevails over immorality. The second sub-theme that supports the major theme pertains to the dominance of morality over immorality. The participants are painfully aware that even scientists belonging to the highest level of the academic echelon are associated with some forms of unethical behaviors in research (Rutjens & Heine, 2016). This is why serious efforts must be done in order to avoid such culpable shortcomings. Although Participant 2 recognizes the relevance of being ethical in conducting research, the temptation to disregard moral considerations is high especially when research outputs are expected within a given period of time. The respondents are unanimous in hoping that immoral research behaviors are avoided. After all, the preference of morality over immorality in the conduct of research is a dominant factor for a productive and progressive society (Melnikoff & Bailey, 2018). Participant 9 is vocal that, at all cost, ethical principles in all phases of the research process must be observed. How this ideal may be achieved, however, is easier said than done. Participant 4 naively asserts the important role of conscience to prevent research maladies. However, as sociologists and cultural anthropologies argue, conscience itself is influenced by the prevailing environment. In short, conscience is a product of the community and the *Zeitgeist*.

Importance of ethics is always emphasized. Participants 3 and 10 stressed that ethics is a topic of debate in all academic meetings, including during virtual meetings. This underscores the indubitable fact that professors in Philippine educational institutions are concerned about ethical considerations in all aspects of life, including teaching and research. It is easy to guess



that this might be a lingering impact of the pervasive Christian values among Filipinos, who typically exhibit high moral expectations in all endeavors.

Witnessing Poor Research Quality

The second major theme that emerged from the narrations of the selected participants is their painful observation of poor-quality researches being published in various media, including academic channels. For Dobler (2020), there are many examples of poor-quality research. In laboratory researches, these include numerous trials on different drug interventions with poor study design, drawing conclusions about the effectiveness of interventions based on non-randomized studies, and the early publication of large numbers of poorly designed studies, with poor editing, poor phrasing, and grammatical errors. The list may go on, but in particular, the participants were more interested in three perennial issues: (1) fabrication of data, (2) plagiarism, and (3) conflict of interest.

Fabrication. Unfortunately, fabrication in research remains a problem even in the midst of the great revolution in information technology. The participants specifically aired their concern over this. According to Ford (2018), fabrication refers to the manipulation of research materials or processes, or changing or omitting data such that the research is not accurately presented in the research records. Three participants recounted their observations with regard to this research misconduct. It would be interesting to pursue another research that would identify the reasons why researchers employ fabrication, even when they are aware of its unethicalness and detrimental effect on the researchers' reputation. In a study conducted with Sub-Saharan participants, the result concluded that "fabrications were motivated by irreconcilable moral concerns, faltering morale resulting from poor management, and inadequate institutional support" (Kingori & Gerrets, 2016). It would be interesting if such a research is replicated in the Philippine context to see if the results would be the same.

Plagiarism. Plagiarism also emerged among one of the chief ethical concerns of the participants. Plagiarism is the act of taking the writings or ideas of another person and passing them off as one's own (Dhammi & Haq, 2016). This is clearly unethical conduct. The participants indicated that the availability of information on the internet makes it easy to copy and paste ideas. Moreover, there may be cultural factors at play. While Western ideology emphasizes intellectual property rights, copyrights, and other related rights related to ownership of ideas, Asian mentality is not as individualistic. For instance, in Asian nations where respect to the elderly is a cultural value of the highest order, younger scholars and students are actually expected to borrow, quote, and adopt the ideas of other people. Doing these are considered as valuable acts of self-humility and honoring others. In short, copying other people's ideas are encouraged by cultural mores (Bloch, 2008, 219-230).



Conflict of interest. According to Romain (2015), conflicts of interest represent circumstances in which professional judgments or actions regarding a primary interest, such as the responsibilities of a researcher, may be at risk of being unduly influenced by a secondary interest, such as financial gain or career advancement. The ideal of detached research as a prerequisite of objectivity is as old as the Enlightenment, and although this ideal has already been rendered obsolete by the postmodern turn, the mesmerizing concept of objectivity lingers in academic circles. The possibility of conducting research that is completely devoid of personal attachments and subjectivities remains suspect in the 20th century and in the foreseeable future. There is an increasing consensus that detached objectivity is a myth. So when we resign to the reality that our personal subjectivities unavoidably affect our research activities and outputs, what may be done? So far, no remedy has yet been found. The temporary solution, which most reputable journals employ, is that researchers must reveal whatever conflict of interest may have influenced their research. This means that the requirement is not to avoid conflicts of interest; what is required is mere acknowledgment of these.

Protection from Harm is Inviolable

The third major theme that emerged from the narrations of the participants pertains to protection from harm being inviolable. This major theme was supported by two sub-themes, namely: (1) humans are respected and cared for, and (2) ethical principles are advocated.

Humans are respected and cared for. Research is completed because there are courageous individuals who possess the integrity to share their opinions and viewpoints regarding a particular research subject. Recognizing that all individuals possess value and worth is an important step towards their safety and protection. In fact, they must be recognized for their intellect and potentials by always ensuring their safety and protection in the conduct of research because their contribution to the success of any research is important. Participants 2, 7, and 9 asserted that research respondents must be handled with utmost care. The underlying principle of participation must be upheld, i.e., research subjects have the right to choose their level of involvement and to withdraw anytime from the study. These must be observed. Their dignity must be protected, which entails confidentiality, good data management, and responsible interpretation of data. In short, research subjects must be treated as partners, not objects from which data are irresponsibly and callously squeezed from.

Ethical principles are advocated. In the study, four ethical principles were employed by researchers in their study, namely: autonomy, beneficence and non-maleficence, anonymity, and confidentiality. The participants in the study affirmed the importance of these four principles in order “to safeguard client’s physical, personal, and social integrity.”



Discussion

As emphasized by Agunloye (2019), there are intrinsic and situational ethical tenets that must be observed in any research and scholarship effort intended for dissemination. To guarantee prudence and trustworthiness, the conditions unique to research or scholarship should be evaluated in the context of their ethical standards. This phenomenological investigation sought to capture the lived experiences of college professors in Philippine higher education institutions who have been adopting ethical considerations while doing research since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Given the importance of ethics for the conduct of research, it should come as no surprise that many different professional associations, government agencies, and colleges, and universities have adopted specific codes, rules, and policies relating to research ethics. Clearly, it is important to strive for honesty in all scientific communications. Researchers must honestly report data, results, methods and procedures, and publication status. They must not fabricate, falsify, or misrepresent data, in order to deceive colleagues, research sponsors, or the public. Moreover, researchers must strive to avoid bias in experimental design, data analysis, data interpretation, peer review, personnel decisions, grant writing, expert testimony, and other aspects of research where objectivity is expected or required. Every good writer must avoid or minimize bias or self-deception, and disclose personal or financial interests that may affect the results of their research.

There should also be an element of transparency. Data, outcomes, ideas, tools, and resources should all be shared. Everyone must be receptive to fresh ideas and criticism. Protection of private communications like papers or grants that have been submitted for publication, employee records, commercial or military secrets, and patient records must be kept as a priority. More crucially, publications must have as its goal the enhancement of scholarship, not just one's personal career.

Scientific fraud is to be blamed for bad research. Scientific fraud happens, as indicated in this study, through fabrication, plagiarism, and conflicts of interest. The constraints of our contemporary circumstances must not become licenses to lowering research standards (Kimmelman & London., 2020). Sadly, a good number of published medical researches appear to be erroneous, cannot be reproduced, and/or has minimal or no usefulness (ESHRE Capri Workshop Group, 2018). Appropriate research topics, bad study design, incorrect execution, irrelevant endpoints, inadequate reporting, and/or nonpublication are estimated to squander 85% of all research money (MacLeod, et al., 2014). Vigilant and careful evaluation of the quality of research practice remains an important practice, which must be implemented in all domains. Higher education institutions must work together, and hard, to achieve our desired research ethics standards (Martensson et al., 2016).



It is paramount for researchers to ensure research respondents are always protected. This was voiced by the participants in this study. For instance, according to Constantin (2018), incidents like oxygen studies on preterm newborns without their parents' agreement are a breach of human rights and ethical principles. Furthermore, the danger of mild strain must be weighed against the research's societal benefit as well as the value to the volunteers. Researchers must provide as much details as possible to justify such usefulness and value to all parties involved. Researchers should also make sure that everyone who has been a part of the study receives competent follow-up to address any issues that may have developed because of their involvement (Research Ethics Committees, 2019).

Furthermore, researchers should be cognizant of any unexpected repercussions of their work, such as other members of a group feeling overly exposed. Third-party stress should be evaluated against the important role of research and truth-seeking (Al Tajir, 2018). More importantly, there should be models of consultancy, and shared responsibility between investigators, data owners, and review boards should be implemented to ensure better protection of research participants (Favaretto et al., 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

College professors involved in research experience firsthand how research inquiries are made during the COVID-19 epidemic while preserving ethics as the foundation of their academic breakthroughs in the background. Maintaining the highest ethical standards in research is very difficult and time-consuming. When taking all of these into consideration, researchers who adhere to the greatest ethical standards are required to cooperate in order to further knowledge growth, especially during times of turmoil.

Research must be done in compliance with ethical guidelines. To make this possible, the study strongly suggests that all sponsored researches be subjected to peer review prior to publication. Experienced scholars who are competent in the management and tracking of research in research organizations are also required for researchers to collaborate with. More significantly, both inexperienced and expert researchers must be given the opportunity to engage in the most rigorous testing processes to ensure that the highest degree of ethical standards are met. Finally, university ethical review committees must set high criteria to guarantee that ethical principles are followed at all times, regardless of the severity of the pandemic.

Conflict of Interest

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