

Community Resilience During Typhoon *Ondoy*: The Case of Ateneoville

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This research looked into the experiences of survivors in the wake of Typhoon Ondoy. Using positive psychology as a framework for understanding community survival and resilience in disaster situations, we examined the positive characteristics among members of a community that was severely affected by the typhoon. Based on focus group discussions, ten positive characteristics were identified as both resources and outcomes in the disaster experience. These were: (1) pakikibagay sa kalikasan, (2) malasakit, (3) bayanihan, (4) tiwala, (5) pagtitiis, (6) pagkamasayahin at palabiro, (7) lakas ng loob at tapang sa gitna ng takot, (8) pagkamapamaraan, (9) pasasalamat, and (10) pananalig sa Diyos. Results were discussed in the light of positive action and future implications for capacity-building in disaster management and interventions.

Keywords: community resilience, disaster management, disaster intervention, positive psychology

The discourse on community resilience in the context of disasters has generally taken two paths: as a desired outcome or as a process leading to a desired outcome (Kaplan, 1999). The earlier perspective of resilience as an outcome tends to reinforce the reactive stance that focuses on controlling or minimizing the effects of disasters. The more recent view of resilience as a

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deliberate process leading to a desired outcome involves a more adaptive approach in enhancing the capacity of the affected community in times of disasters. More importantly, it recognizes the human factor in disasters, thereby encouraging individual and communal responsibility for action, such as preparation of a disaster plan, capacity building to implement the plan, and modification of recovery priorities to deal with predictable and unpredictable consequences of disasters. This study examines community resilience as a process of fostering the psychological resources, strengths, virtues and positive behavior of people in adapting to adverse circumstances.

In September 26 of 2009, Typhoon *Ondoy* (International Code Name: "Ketsana") battered the city of Manila, pouring a month's worth of rain in half a day. As the rains persisted, major roads and neighborhoods were instantaneously flooded forcing people to scramble to higher grounds and structures. Media coverage of the typhoon vivified the terror of families on their rooftops as they desperately called for rescue, while other homes and cars were swept away by the deluge. Within hours, huge portions of Marikina, Pasig, Rizal and Quezon City became virtual extensions of rivers. In its wake, Typhoon *Ondoy* left 880,175 families severely affected, 682 casualties (337 dead, 308 injured and 37 missing), and damaged infrastructure and agriculture amounting to PhP10.5 billion (National Disaster Coordinating Council, 2009).

One of the communities severely affected by Typhoon *Ondoy* was the Ateneoville Subdivision in Nangka, Marikina. At the height of the typhoon, the swollen Marikina River came rushing through the connecting Nangka River that overflowed into the Ateneoville neighborhood, rising above the 30-foot perimeter wall that was built precisely to protect the community from the river. In a matter of seconds, the houses were filled with water, mud and debris, thereby forcing the residents to flee to a nearby supermarket before the waist-level waters eventually became chest deep. The following days saw community efforts to restore and rebuild the homes of community members, with the help of the residents as well as the assistance of donors and volunteers from the Ateneo de Manila University.

Positive Psychology as Framework for Understanding Survival in Natural Disasters

Natural disasters, such as Typhoon *Ondoy*, come unexpectedly and usually bring massive destruction of lives and properties. Natural disasters also inflict psychosocial costs such as fear, anxiety, depression, trauma, and other threats to a person's well-being. Traditional psychological

approaches to the study of natural disasters tend to focus on the psychological costs, problems, psychopathology and deficits in human nature that arise due to these crises. Positive psychology, in contrast, provides an alternative means of understanding the impact of natural disasters through a framework that considers the psychological resources, strengths, virtues, and positive behavior of people. In using the lens of positive psychology, we aim to focus on building up people's psychological resources and strengths rather than on reducing their vulnerability during disasters, with a long-term view of fostering optimal human functioning.

Thus, we consider individuals and communities affected by natural disasters not as victims but as survivors, the fundamental difference being "that the former feels himself subject to a situation over which he has no control over his environment or himself, whereas a survivor has regained a sense of control and is able to meet the demands of whatever difficulty confronts him. A victim is passive and dependent upon others; a survivor is not – he is able to take an active role in efforts to help his community and himself recover from the disaster" (Ehrenreich, 2001, p. 9). Intrinsic to the experience of survivors is the concept of resilience.

Community Resilience

Resilience is derived from the Latin word *resilio*, which means "to jump back" (Klein, Nicholls & Thomalla, 2003). It may be used to describe individuals who manifest the ability to recover quickly from shock, illness or hardship. A person considered resilient is flexible, adaptable, enduring, and optimistic. He or she bounces back from adversity (Vickers & Kouzmin, 2001). When applied to communities in the midst of a disaster, resilience is considered as the "shield," "shock absorber," or buffer that moderates the trajectory of an expected negative outcome, thereby ensuring mild or small-scale negative consequences for its members. It may also refer to the capacity of a system to adjust when it is exposed to hazardous conditions, by resisting or changing in order to reach and maintain an acceptable level of functioning and structure (Manyena, 2006).

Community resilience may also be understood as a desired outcome or a process leading to a desirable outcome. As a desired outcome in disaster risk reduction and management for instance, efforts may be geared to ensure minimal loss of life, property and livelihood to facilitate the community's recovery of life, property and livelihood within the shortest possible time. Despite well-meaning efforts, the trouble with this outcome view of community resilience is its tendency to affirm the reactive stance in disaster

management (McEntire, Fuller, Johnston & Weber, 2002). On the other hand, considering community resilience as a purposeful process involves promoting the active engagement of people in programs, activities, and behaviors that enhance their capacity to survive and even flourish in adverse conditions.

Some of the ways by which resilience can be fostered among people affected by natural disasters include coping mechanisms such as information-seeking, praying, seeking action and communicating with others (Spence, Lachlan, Burke & Seeger, 2007). Other coping strategies of survivors include the following: (1) returning to routine or sense of normalcy, (2) rebuilding family structures, (3) sharing communal resources, (4) emotional expressions of loss and grief, and (5) finding benefits from the disaster experience (Kayser, Wind, & Ashok Shankar, 2008). In addition, resilience has also been found to be associated with the capacity to generate and fulfill realistic plans, a positive view of self and belief in one's own strengths and abilities, communication and problem-solving skills, and the capacity to understand and manage feelings (American Psychological Association [APA], 2009). In sum, resilience involves harnessing one's strengths and positive qualities towards the achievement of valuable outcomes for oneself and for others.

Using the positive psychology framework and the aforementioned perspective on community resilience, this research aims to understand the characteristics that community members possess and harness in the face of natural disasters. Specifically, we examine the positive qualities, themes, and manifestations of community resilience that were reflected among the Ateneo-ville residents, which enabled them to survive and bounce back from the disaster caused by Typhoon *Ondoy*.

METHOD

This study is part of a larger project investigating the distinct experience of a community in a wide-scale disaster such as Typhoon *Ondoy*. While that larger data set was gathered through mixed methods employing a survey and focus group discussions (FGD), this study features only the qualitative data gathered from the FGD. In an FGD, conversations among participants generate data that are "talk," thus eliciting information from a combination of local perspectives (Larson, Grudens-Schuck, & Lundy Allen, 2003). The process resembles what Filipinos popularly call "kwentuhan" or story-telling.

The FGD involved nine (9) participants who were residents of the Ateneo-ville and were present in the village throughout the onslaught of

Typhoon *Ondoy*. Of these, two (2) older men and four (4) male adolescents were actively engaged in moving women, children and elderly from their residences to the evacuation center at the second floor of the nearby supermarket. The rest were three (3) women, all mothers who helped take care of other families in the second floor of their homes or of the supermarket. The facilitator-researcher was a fellow resident of the Ateneoville Subdivision, and was thus familiar to the FGD participants. Participants who were still in the process of cleaning their homes and recovering from the aftermath of the typhoon were invited to come together to her house on a Sunday afternoon two weeks after Typhoon *Ondoy*. The questions and conversations in the FGD centered on the actual experiences of the participants and on the positive characteristics they discovered in themselves and in others that helped them recover from the natural disaster of *Ondoy*.

RESULTS

Themes and patterns emerged from the examination of conversation transcripts from the FGD, which were organized into the following ten positive characteristics:

1. *Pakikibagay sa Kalikasan* (Adaptation to Nature)

While majority of the FGD participants had no prior experience with typhoon and floods of this magnitude, they recognized the distinctive cues provided by the fast-rising level and speed of the river water beyond the village perimeter wall. The president of the village was alerted by the security guards on duty the night before the flood. Immediately, the president went to the perimeter wall to examine the situation and immediately instructed the guards to monitor the height and speed of the river throughout the night.

Other residents were likewise alarmed with the behavior of the river. It appeared that the residents, though lacking in exposure to similar experiences, responded with openness to what nature and others were revealing about the strange phenomena. They immediately complied with the call to prepare for evacuation as the waters continued to rise. It was noted that no one pretended to “know-it-all” and offered his or her contrasting opinion. While no panic ensued in the early morning of the typhoon, the residents were sufficiently alerted and mobilized for action.

2. *Malasakit* (Empathy, Care and Concern for the Other)

Malasakit is a Filipino term for a deep sense of care and concern for one's *kapwa* (the other in relation to oneself). This is based on a profound empathy for the other, resulting in the personal engagement in the welfare of the other as one's own. It is a characteristic highly valued among Filipinos as it allows them to go the "extra mile" for each other. During the typhoon, many households were left by the adults who went off to work that Saturday morning, leaving children and helpers by themselves as floodwaters entered the village into each home. Yet, in the minds of the other adults who were in the village at that time, there was no question that everyone would be attended to like one's own as residents welcomed children and help into their homes, taking care of family and non-family alike. The FGD participants also noted that this *malasakit* extended to other communities as residents volunteered help to those who suffered the same or even greater devastation from Typhoon *Ondoy*, even before their own full recovery.

3. *Bayanihan* (Collective Responsibility for Each Other)

Bayanihan is a Filipino experience of collective help given to any member of the community in need. The original practice involved members of a community helping a resident to lift and move his entire house to another location. The able-bodied men would insert bamboo poles underneath the locally-made house in order to facilitate the task of lifting the entire house for relocation.

In the midst of typhoon *Ondoy*, there was no more differentiation between what was one's own or the others'. Food that was salvaged before the rising floods submerged the kitchens was shared by all. Those who opted to take refuge at the second floor of the village president's house found themselves continuously preparing food for those who were going to and from the evacuation center. Each one participated in the *bayanihan* that ensured the safety of each household and consequently, of the entire village.

4. *Tiwala* (Trust)

The collective responsibility for each other fortified trust among its members. This trust was manifested in the feeling of safety with each other that no matter what happens, the residents would not leave anyone unattended. This was further affirmed by another participant who became more convinced to stay in the village, despite suggestions to consider other

locations: “*Kahit tinatanong ng ibang tao kung aalis na ba kami sa Marikina, sabi ko hindi rin... Kasi at least dito, alam ko na kapag may nangyari na tulad nung nangyari, may makakapitan kami... Alam ko na kahit anong mangyari, magkakatulung-tulungan talaga tayo...*” (“Even when other people ask me about leaving Marikina, I said I won’t leave because at least here, I know that if anything happens again like what happened, I can hang on to others... I know that whatever happens we will help each other...”).

5. *Pagtitiis* (Endurance)

Endurance is the ability to bear suffering or pain in the face of adversity. It involves patience, stamina and fortitude. It was a long night for those who had nowhere to go as their one-floor houses were submerged in the mud water. Staying at the second floor of the nearby Parco Supermarket was incredibly uncomfortable with just the bare cement floors on which the residents had to rest their drenched and exhausted bodies. While electricity was not yet restored in the village, many households lived on relief goods that they had to line up for in the village office. While many were not used to this kind of living condition, they were able to bear much physical and emotional discomfort. A participant confirmed this as she shared, “*Tingnan mo iyong mga kamay natin, sa dami ng kailangan nating linisin at ayusin*” (“Look at our hands, with all the cleaning and fixing that we have to do”).

6. *Pagkamasayahin at Palabiro* (Cheerfulness and Sense of Humor)

Throughout the session, the FGD participants shared a lot of laughter and banter as the facilitator navigated through personal and collective issues of loss and difficulty. This did not trivialize the gravity of the disaster experienced by the Ateneoville residents, but rather provided the relief that allowed them to manage the long path to recovery. Even when volunteers came in the village to join the clean-up brigade, a sense of cheerfulness pervaded the atmosphere as some joked about losing weight in the process, “*Sabi nung mga tumutulong dito, nag-enroll pa ako sa gym, dito lang pala ako papayat...*” (“Those who came here to help said that they did not have to enroll in a gym anymore as their clean-up helped them to lose weight”). No one appeared to be offended but everyone joined in hearty laughter. It is a common observation that Filipinos respond to adversity with a great deal of humor (Andres, 2002; Jocano, 1999). They can laugh at themselves and the situation they are in. Among themselves, no one takes

offense; instead there is a common feeling of relief and lightness, and what appears to be difficult is better handled.

7. *Lakas ng Loob at Tapang sa Gitna ng Takot* (Courage and Bravery in the Midst of Fear)

Courage was evident especially among those who moved through the raging floodwaters to inform residents to evacuate and to help them get to the evacuation center safely. There was an admission of fear among the FGD participants who were directly involved in bringing their neighbors to safety, yet the greater goal of saving lives overrode whatever fear was felt. One of the younger participants recalled that despite his lack of skill in swimming, he continued to brave the strong floods to get to all the residents. Another participant affirmed this when he said, "*Pumasok sa isip ko na iyong mga tao, kahit hindi ko kakilala, kailangang makalabas ng bahay at makalikas... Lakas ng loob lang talaga... Siguro, doon sa danger, ang kailangan talagang gawin, tumulong...*" ("The thought of the people entered my mind, even if I did not know them, as long as they are brought out of their homes into safety... It was really courage... maybe in times of danger, what really matters, is to do what has to be done, to help").

8. *Pagkamapamaraan* (Resourcefulness)

The resourcefulness of the residents emerged as they found a way to get the children out of the village. Without any rescue boats to help them, the residents used wash basins ("*palanggana*") and kiddie inflatable pools to securely bring young children across the muddy floodwaters. Furthermore, when the entrance and exit to the village became almost impassable due to the rising and speeding floodwaters, a rope was tied from the guard house to Parco Supermarket to allow the movers to hold on to something secure as they evacuated.

In the aftermath of the flood, the next task was to clear the village of massive amounts of mud. The residents improvised and used placards as shovels to push out mud from their respective properties onto vacant lots within the village. Plastic bags became boots while plastic crates were used to transport mud and trash into a common garbage dump. Soon, resources from the larger community of the university poured into the village. Truckloads of volunteers helped clean the village. Construction equipment were lent to facilitate the cleaning of the village. With more people helping the residents, the task of rebuilding homes and lives became an achievable reality in the succeeding weeks.

9. *Pasasalamat* (Gratitude)

Counting one's blessings, especially given the absence of human casualties within the village, helped the residents deal with the tremendous loss of property and disruption of life and work. Consideration of the loss suffered by other individuals and communities provided more reason for *pasasalamat* or gratitude. Furthermore, the outpouring of help from the university donors and volunteers made them truly grateful, that they resolved as a community to pay forward to other less fortunate villages that did not receive much provision. The president of the homeowners association said that the relief goods were more than what the residents essentially needed for the moment and that they really had to give to other communities in greater need.

10. *Pananalig sa Diyos* (Faith in God)

During the flood, the residents turned to prayer as fears mounted with the rising waters. Many remained hopeful about their survival as they relied on their faith to see them through. An FGD participant elaborated on this by stating, "*Iyong faith in God, konektado iyon sa hopefulness eh*" ("Faith in God is connected with hopefulness"). One of the participants even went on to say that after the flood, he realized that he needed to deepen his faith, "*I feel na I should deepen my faith... Parang nahiya nga ako na, parang ngayon ko lang na-discover na hindi pala ako masyado ganoon... Ako lang ha, noong narinig ko iyong tugtog sa simbahan, naiyak na ako... Baka importante na we pray together as a community...*" ("I feel I should deepen my faith... I felt ashamed that it's just now that I discovered that I lack faith. When I heard the songs in the mass, I became tearful... maybe it's important that we pray together as a community").

DISCUSSION

Positive Characteristics as Resources and Outcomes in Disaster Events

In the wake of natural disasters that wreak destruction and confusion among individuals and communities, positive characteristics serve two fundamental roles in limiting the potential negative impact of such events and facilitating recovery and return to some form of normalcy. On the one hand, positive characteristics serve as resources or assets that shield people

from potential trauma and distress. Put simply, the resilience of people in the midst of adversity is grounded on positive characteristics. Based on our results, the positive characteristics of *pakikibagay sa kalikasan*, *malasakit*, *bayanihan*, *tiwala*, *pag-asa*, *pagtitiis*, *pagkamasayahin at palabiro*, *lakas ng loob at tapang sa gitna ng takot*, *pagkamapamaraan*, *pasasalamat*, and *pananalig sa Diyos* proved to be instrumental in helping the community to survive and rise above the tragedy brought about by Typhoon *Ondoy*. This finding finds support in the study of Bankoff (2003) on Filipino's resilience: "Much of a people's resilience to withstand hazard lies in the intangible qualities generated by shared cultural attitudes and community spirit. This is very much the case in the Philippines where concepts such as *pakikipagkapwa*, *pakikisama* and especially *bayanihan* are essential elements in Filipinos' abilities to cope with the risks they experience on a daily basis and for whom hazard is a frequent life experience" (p. 179).

On the other hand, positive characteristics can also be seen as results or products that come about following a person's crisis experiences. Based on our results, we can see that the Typhoon *Ondoy* experience made the positive characteristics of the survivors come to the surface. For instance, findings revealed that residents realize that they were capable of conquering their fears in order to do what needed to be done in emergency situations. Furthermore, the positive characteristic of *pananalig sa Diyos* was fortified among the residents as the experience served to renew their hopes in the future as well as their personal relationships with their God.

Positive Action as Manifestations of Positive Characteristics

In addition to positive characteristics, we also put forth the importance of positive actions in crisis situations. We define positive actions as goal-directed behaviors undertaken in the face of adversity for the benefit of oneself and others. Four categories of positive actions were evident among the Ateneoville residents during and after their Typhoon *Ondoy* experience. These were: (1) pursuing a common goal of zero human casualty, (2) organizing an early warning system, (3) following a communication protocol, and (4) creating procedures for evacuation.

Based on our results, we assert that the positive characteristics manifested among the Ateneoville residents further revealed themselves in positive actions. To illustrate, the positive characteristics of *pakikibagay sa kalikasan* (adaptation to nature) seem to point towards the positive action of organizing an early warning system, as observations about one's environment moved the Ateneoville residents to take heed of the warning

signs of the flood. Also, the positive characteristics of *malasakit* (empathy, care and concern for the other) and *bayanihan* (collective responsibility for the other) served to inspire rescue and evacuation efforts in view of ensuring the safety of everyone in the community. Positive action was also very much present in the community's future plans for disaster preparedness, as Ateneoville residents pushed for the implementation of crisis management training sessions in the days following Typhoon *Ondoy*. Thus, as positive characteristics were manifested in positive actions, the result was community survival and resilience in the face of crisis situations such as natural disasters.

Capacity-Building for Disaster Risk Reduction and Management

Manyena (2006), in his provocative study on revisiting the concept of resilience, asserts that development practitioners are starting to recognize that successful disaster interventions are more likely to lead towards genuinely positive effects on human well-being when the emphasis is on building local knowledge and augmenting existing capacity rather than simply avoiding or minimizing vulnerabilities. The experience of the Ateneoville may well reinforce the importance of identifying indigenous qualities or characteristics that emerge in the midst of crisis situations. These elements allow for positive action in view of recovering from loss and rebuilding lives, homes, and communities. As such, based on the results of this research, we argue for a positive psychology or strengths-based approach to psychosocial interventions for survivors of natural disasters – an approach that goes beyond understanding weaknesses and pathologies toward capitalizing on strengths and virtues in view of achieving optimal human functioning in the wake of adversities brought about by natural disasters.

Results of this study extend the discourse in disaster risk reduction and management from the vantage point of positive psychology. It provides empirical support to the argument that community resilience could be viewed as the intrinsic capacity of a system predisposed to adapt, survive and rebuild in response to natural disturbances to by harnessing its positive beliefs, values, characteristics and practices. This perspective, and the results of this study, recognize the factors that build the capacity of people to deliberately prepare for and respond effectively to disturbances in their environment. Highlighting resilience affirms what communities can do for themselves and how to strengthen their capacities, rather than concentrating on their vulnerability to disaster or their needs in emergency situations. This does not diminish the importance of systematic and immediate initiatives to mitigate the negative consequences of disasters; rather, the study highlights

the need to integrate the longer-term and positive approach of fostering community resilience in the integrated and multi-disciplinary strategies in the research and practice of disaster risk reduction and management.

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