The Untold Stories of People Who Had Suicidal Ideations:
A Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

This study explored and described the lived experiences of people who had suicidal ideations. It gathered information and real-life experiences to reveal the significant life stories of persons with suicidal thoughts. Descriptive phenomenology was employed to explore and describe the lived experiences of young adults who had suicidal ideation. The study included eight participants who were selected purposively. A semi-structured individual interview was utilized in gathering the data. Data analysis was done immediately after every data collection using Colaizzi's seven-step processes. This study has three central themes that emerged from the data which included a) emotional experience, b) life's crisis, and c) sparks of hope in life. The main themes are classified into eleven categories: the feeling of emptiness, feeling of worthlessness, feeling of emotional pain, feeling of giving up, family conflict, intrapersonal conflict, challenging life situations, isolation, restoration and installation of hope, sustaining positive relationships, and sense of life. This research revealed that all have their battles to fight. Coping with their issues, becoming independent, and trying to bridge the gap between their dear ones and, most importantly, with themselves entail emotional labor, as each participant from a different context with different backstories shared their unique experiences. Therefore, student nurses should uplift these vulnerable groups' spiritual values and morals and encourage them to vent their feelings to trusted friends.

Keywords: Suicide, ideations, real-life, experiences, young adult

INTRODUCTION

Life is to live and let live. Life can be made extraordinary or can be essentially steered. People's lives are unique. They have a fantastic journey and discoveries in life. People's time should not dwell on the aspects they do not have. Appreciate the journey because life is a beautiful gift. People must understand everything here and now and learn to live fully.

People encounter various struggles in life, ranging from easy to challenging, and during difficult times, thoughts of self-harm may arise as individuals metaphorically

walk on thorns, representing suicidal ideation—an unusual preoccupation with suicide (Mertika et al., 2020). Suicidal ideations, often unrecognized and hidden, pose challenges for others to discern someone's prolonged suffering, emphasizing the importance of open, non-judgmental communication to address these mental health concerns. Mental health, a frequently overlooked issue, encompasses suicide, which often remains shrouded in discrete signs and symptoms, leading to a lack of awareness and leaving the root causes buried with those who commit suicide (Banis, 2019).

Suicide is a global public health concern. Its prevalence is high among adolescents and young adults. Within the Philippines, the prevalence of suicide is not apparent since there is no country-wide suicide registry in situ. A survey reported that 11.6 % of Filipino adolescents aged 13 to 17 considered attempting suicide, while 16.8% attempted suicide at least once in the past year (Estrada, 2019).

Extensive evidence indicates that the risk factor linked to suicidal ideation is commonly triggered by depression and other mood disorders (Florentino, 2020), with numerous studies exploring the psychological processes during the COVID-19 pandemic, while the WHO (2019) acknowledges a strong association between suicidal ideation and various catastrophic life crises.

Suicidal ideation is commonly linked to depression and mood disorders, but Steven and Sher (2013) highlighted correlations with various mental illnesses, life events, and family factors that may elevate the risk. Harmer et al. (2020) defined suicidal ideations (SI) as a broad term encompassing contemplations, desires, and preoccupations with death and suicide.

Suicide rates vary globally, with approximately 800,000 people dying by suicide each year according to the World Health Organization (2019). In the Philippines, with a population of around 90 million, the suicide mortality rate was 3.2 percent per 100,000 people in 2016, as reported by the World Bank. Recent data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) revealed a 25.7 percent increase in self-harm deaths in 2020, making suicide the 27th leading cause of death in the country. Additionally, statistics from the health department in Region 1 indicate that from January to August 2018, there were 108 reported suicide cases, with 85% of them involving males and the highest number occurring in Ilocos Norte (31 cases).

As countries enforced new stay-at-home measures to combat COVID-19, concerns about rising suicide rates are fueled by factors such as a decline in mental health, increased reports of self-harm among individuals with COVID-19, delays in accessing mental health services, and historical links between previous epidemics and increased suicidal deaths, as noted by John et al. (2020). Predictions about the impact on suicide rates range from 1% to 145%, reflecting underlying assumptions, with a particular focus on the adverse effects on the mental health of children and youth. While early reviews lacked sturdy epidemiological studies on suicide, recent research

suggests emerging trends, prompting caution in interpreting the literature on the impact of COVID-19 on suicide (John et al., 2020).

Meanwhile, identifying suicide risk in college students remains difficult (Cukrowiczet et al., 2011). This is due, in part, to the relatively low rate of completed suicide among college students. This may decrease the perceived importance of addressing suicide risk or reduce attention to risk factors (e. g., depression, substance abuse) for suicide. Consequently, screening for suicide risk in college students appears to suffer from poor sensitivity (Babida, 2020), as most risk factors that have been identified have only modest correlations with suicidal behavior, and mental health professionals do not see many students at risk for suicidal behavior. The most significant elevation in suicide ideation occurs at the highest depressive symptoms, and college students also experience significant suicide ideation with mild and moderate depressive symptoms.

Depressed people who have mild to moderate symptoms are more likely to have suicidal thoughts, according to a report by Cukrowicz et al. (2011). Overall, the findings support the notion that increased suicidal ideation is not limited to college students whose grades suggest they suffer from extreme depressive symptoms; instead, college students with more minor depressive symptoms are more likely to consider suicide. This pattern of findings was repeated through various samples, self-reported depression scales, and instruments designed to assess current suicidal ideation.

Objectives of the Study

The paper explored the lived experiences of individuals with suicidal ideations. Specifically, it determined the central themes and sub-themes of their untold stories.

METHODOLOGY

This portion includes the research design, population, instrument, procedure and data analysis of the study.

Research Design

This study utilized descriptive phenomenology, a potent instrument to illuminate poorly understood aspects of people's experiences, actions, and intentions held beliefs and assumptions (Deakin, 2020).

Participants of the Study

Eight participants were chosen using a purposive sampling strategy, involving the selection of individuals meeting the inclusion criteria (at least 18 years old male or female, with a history of suicidal ideation in the past five years) and excluding those below 18 or currently experiencing suicidal thoughts.

Data Collection and Instruments

The researchers obtained approval from the College of Nursing ERC for their study and utilized social media to connect with participants during the pandemic. Participants were approached through text messages to seek consent and were informed about the interview process and data recording. Due to pandemic restrictions, the researchers adapted by using virtual platforms like Google Meet for interviews and providing interview questions through messenger applications for those unwilling to participate virtually. Before gathering the data, researchers accomplished self-awareness through reflection, discovering how they feel and beliefs about suicidal ideations. To ensure participant comfort, only one interviewer was present, interviews were voice-recorded, and participants were given the flexibility to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable, however, they were encouraged to participate as it contributes to the success of the study. Data collection continued until redundancy or data saturation was achieved.

An interview topic guide was adapted on the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario, SCL1201-Section 3: Suicide Assessment, with the lead question: "Sometimes people feel that life is not worth living. Can you tell me how you think about your life?"

Analysis of Data

In this study, the researchers employed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological analysis, a method that uniquely emphasizes validation through participant feedback. The analysis involved reading and extracting significant statements from each transcript, formulating meanings, clustering themes, creating a comprehensive outline, describing the fundamental structure, and validating results by returning to participants to ensure the findings accurately reflected their own stories and experiences. To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researchers applied Lincoln and Guba's Four Rigor in qualitative research, focusing on credibility (demonstrated through extensive time spent with participants), transferability (achieved through a rich description of data for external validity), dependability (ensured by maintaining and preserving all relevant data), and confirmability (verified by participants to align with their experiences). These measures aimed to enhance the validity and authenticity of the collected data.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers committed to deleting all records upon study completion, emphasizing transparency and ethical conduct throughout. The principal means of protecting the rights of research participants is through the process of informed consent, ensuring they have a complete understanding of the study. Respondents were given the autonomy to decide whether to participate in the study due to its sensitive nature, with no requirement for parental approval.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Figure 1 illustrates three central themes—emotional experience, life's crisis, and sparks of hope in life—each encompassing eleven subthemes, including feelings of emptiness, worthlessness, emotional pain, giving up, family conflict, intrapersonal conflict, challenging life situations, isolation, restoration, installation of hope, sustaining positive relationships, and sense of life.

Figure 1
The central themes and subthemes
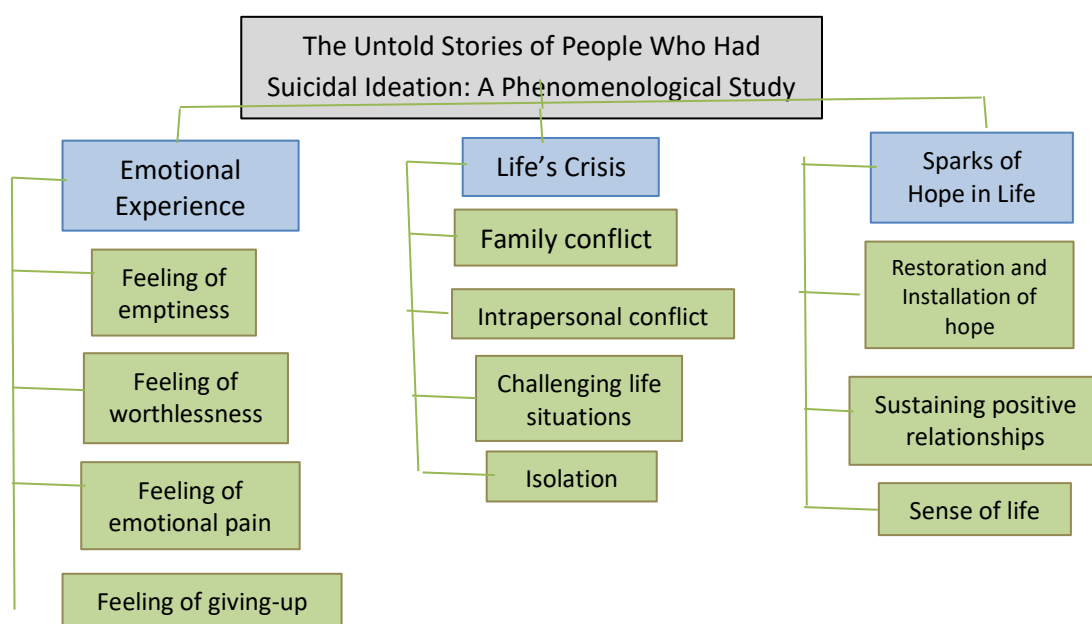
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Individuals with suicidal ideation have diverse and unique experiences, and what may be bearable for some can be unbearable for others. Listening to their unspoken feelings is crucial, as those in distress often mask their true emotions for the sake of others. Despite facing emotional difficulties that challenge their worth and existence, these individuals still yearn for a sense of belonging, acceptance, and love.

Emotional Experience

The central theme, "emotional experience," describes the emotions that trigger suicidal ideation and how the participants feel during suicidal ideation.

Feeling of Emptiness

The sensation of feeling "empty," characterized by a purposeless and numb existence, manifests as bodily discomfort, particularly in the chest, and a sense of invisibility and alienation from others, as noted by Herron et al. (2021). This feeling, a common aspect of life's emotional experiences, is described by participants who express difficulty feeling satisfaction or happiness, with individual responses ranging from impulsive strategies to adaptive behaviors for coping with emptiness, according to Fruzzetti et al. (2005) and Miller et al. (2021).

Feeling of Worthlessness

Worthlessness, characterized by a feeling of having done nothing valuable for oneself or others, can negatively impact emotional health and is strongly associated with lifetime suicide attempts, particularly in individuals experiencing major depression and recent trauma, according to a study by researchers at Seoul National University. Participant Deadshot expressed the definition of life as "life is not important for me anymore because of the pain and sadness that makes me feel worthless." Participant Kilang verbalized, "Life for me is worthless."

Feeling of Emotional Pain

Psychological pain, or psychache, is an internal manifestation of negative emotions like guilt, hopelessness, fear, and loss, serving as a crucial predictor of suicide, mediating the connections between suicide and factors such as depression, hopelessness, helplessness, and existential questioning. Participant Kilang stated, "I feel pain, and unworthy." Participant Gen expressed, "The dominant feeling is hopelessness. Truly, pain that is extremely unbearable in my own perception seems like the first thought that comes is the pain needs to stop."

Feeling of Giving Up

A person can also undergo passive suicidal ideation, meaning that one wants to die or feels like giving up on life without having concrete plans to die by suicide (Nittle, 2021). Participant Sunflower said, "I didn't think about what life would mean for me back then. As in, it didn't cross in my mind its importance. I just want to disappear back then." Participant Dove said, "I sometimes want to hurt myself thinking how easier it would be to just die instead of trying to live my life." Participant Paradox also said, "I tried to end my life to stop the pain."

Life Crisis

Life crisis often manifests as struggles with feeling locked out of adult obligations, such as finding employment or love, or feeling imprisoned in life roles that are perceived as incongruent with one's identity or suffocating (Robinson, 2016, 2019).

Family Conflict

Family conflicts encompass disputes within a family, involving various relationships such as spouses, children, siblings, grandparents, and extended family members, covering issues like death, illness, financial struggles, transitions, and disagreements Participant Paradox said,"It was an argument of my mom and me, that's the biggest and the heaviest reason why I attempted suicide, and all the other attempts were me trying to escape from all the toxicity. No one was there, not even a single member of the family to understand."

Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal conflicts occur within an individual, manifesting as an implosion when attempting to control oneself during distressing situations, often centered around uncertainty and decision-making challenges with various barriers and factors of attractiveness and unattractiveness (Rahim, 2010). Participant Dove stated "Maybe it is just the way that I cannot control my emotions and how I constantly regret most of my decisions in life. Because I feel like everything I do is wrong."

Challenging Life Situations

Challenging life situations, often vaguely defined in psychological studies, encompass actions that can adversely affect personality development, as individuals navigate various difficulties and test their resilience throughout different life stages, particularly during emerging adulthood, marked by relative instability and internal struggles as young people grapple with defining their identities and life paths (Arnett, 2006). Deadshot expressed, "My own life, I feel grateful, but sometimes I feel tired of living in so many problems that give a breakdown, stress, and depression." Moreover, participant Gen also said, "It's like life gave me reasons or a lot of problems. Challenges that just overlap so I feel that my suicidal ideation became worse."

Isolation

Social isolation disturbs an individual, psychologically or physically, or both, from a network of people with whom one wants or needs to interact. Participant Gen said, "Maybe what I often do is not listening to what my body needs. Like at such times I often confine myself like literally confinement. I am not going out. I do not socialize. I am not eating. Loneliness, anger, despair, sadness, frustration, and, in rare situations, relief are other sensations associated with social isolation. Participant Paradox said, "It is not easy for me to open up to anyone."

Sparks of Hope in Life

Amidst the pervasive feeling of hopelessness that accompanies challenging life situations, the presence of even a small spark of hope serves as a vital motivator,

providing the optimism and encouragement needed to persevere through difficult times.

Restoration and Installation of Hope

Hope, often perceived as a word that has lost its meaning, holds the power of spiritual healing, utilizing positive thoughts to restore and instill hope, a crucial factor in preventing suicide, as individuals with hope are more likely to persevere through challenging times, making counseling essential for those contemplating suicide (Kaplan, 2019). Participants employ coping strategies, including music listening and creating a sound environment with natural and artificial sounds; Participant Gen said, "For me, my form of distraction is to read because I love to read books, wattpad or anything that you can just read. And also watching movies, usually anime and k-drama."

Sustaining Positive Relationship

Positive relationships, whether intimate, familial, or social, play a crucial role in mental and physical well-being, providing feelings of security, happiness, and meaning in life, as defined by the Mental Health Foundation.

Having good relationships can lift a person's mood as participant Dove said, "I would go to my friends and just hang out with them so that I would not feel sad or depressed. I would mostly go out with them the whole day until night time instead of staying in my room where I might have a breakdown again."

Sense of Life

Many people who are motivated live their lives to the fullest, understanding the significance of living and recognizing that their life is their own, not someone else's. Sometimes, life holds a person to live well, as participant Sunflower said, "I realized that harming oneself is wrong, and they say that there's more to life." Moreover, participant Gen also said, "Having suicidal ideations, it made me question the definition of life but paradoxically, it gives me purpose." Often, people acknowledge pressure to have a "perfect" life and show the world how great they are doing instead of pursuing their inner values and passions (Schippers et al., 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

The study revealed three central themes and eleven sub-themes that encapsulated the lived experiences of individuals grappling with suicidal ideation. These insights were derived directly from participants' statements and visualized through a conceptual map crafted by the researchers. The three overarching themes, namely: "emotional experience," "life's crisis," and "sparks of hope in life," served as conceptual

representations of the nuanced and multifaceted experiences, emotions, and perspectives of those who had contemplated suicide.

The research shed light on the diverse battles individuals face, encompassing emotional struggles, the quest for independence, and the endeavor to connect with both loved ones and oneself. Each participant, hailing from distinct contexts and backgrounds, shared their unique journey through the lens of suicidal ideation. The study not only aimed to explore and articulate these lived experiences but also advocated for ethical and evidence-based research in the realm of suicide studies. It underscored the need for enhanced suicide prevention programs and initiatives that address these issues while prioritizing ethics and safety.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the study suggest the following recommendations: (1) Student nurses should give attention, help the participants uplift their spiritual values and morals, and provide personal assistance to cope with their emotional burdens positively. (2) For people experiencing suicidal ideation, talk to family or friends about their feelings and stay connected with others as much as possible. (3) Resilient traits play a crucial role in mitigating the likelihood of suicidal ideation and behaviors, especially when risk factors are present. Collaborative efforts among schools, families, and friends are essential to enhance these resilience factors for children and teenagers at risk, including family support, stability, effective communication, and cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide.

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