



Lived Experiences Of Families During The Covid-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study

¹Shandril Gnanatheebam, ²Vathsala Sadan

¹ Professor, College of Nursing, Christian Medical College, Vellore

²Professor & Former Dean, College of Nursing, Christian Medical College, Vellore

Abstract: This phenomenological study had been undertaken to explore the lived experiences of families faced with and without Covid-19 pandemic in a selected rural area of Southern India. Data were gathered using semi-structured in-depth interviews with open ended questions from participants representing 27 families using purposive sampling. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before the data collection. The data was analyzed using the phenomenological method of Colaizzi. The findings revealed the emergence of three major themes viz., (1) voyage of emotional turmoil, (2) building resilience, adaptation and cohesion and (3) affirming of faith.

Index Terms – Lived Experiences, Resilience, Adaptation, Cohesion, Families, COVID-19 Pandemic.

I. INTRODUCTION

Humankind has been afflicted with major pandemics throughout history such as cholera, plague, influenza, etc. In the context of globalization, with increased travel and trades, there has been an accelerated transmission of infectious diseases. The COVID-19 pandemic that was declared as a public health emergency of international concern by World Health Organization [WHO] on January 30, 2020 and later as a pandemic in March 2020 is said to be truly one of the greatest collective health crises in the history. This disease had altered the life and living of people across the globe irrespective of the nature and level of development of a country. The infection prevention and control guidelines issued by WHO such as mass quarantine, multiple lock-downs, home confinement, frequent hand-washing, social distancing to reduce the risk of transmission of the disease coupled with changing life style, long-term unemployment, economic challenges, closure of educational, religious, cultural, recreational activities, severe travel restrictions and limitations, uncertainty about the future had led many millions to a desperate state.⁵

1.1 Need for the study

The COVID-19 pandemic has played havoc on the healthy functioning of families. Numerous publications reveal that families

suffered more negative consequences of the pandemic than the few positive impacts viz., cordial family relations and

strengthening of family structure. Families were filled with the challenges of overcoming the ill effects of the pandemic

collectively. Family members across all age groups were running the risk of contracting infection and faced challenges of their

own disrupting the routine family functioning. The mitigation measures such as lockdown, closure of schools and public places,

loss of freedom of movement, lack of employment and loss of income affected the family's ability to endure, cope and bounce

back. It has also been observed that when families face adversity, there is a deficit in the mental health of the family that skews

their attention owing to the problem-saturated life-situation making it difficult for the family to identify and build on their resources and strengths. ⁴

1.2 Aim of the study

The aim of the study was to explore and compare the lived experiences of families faced with and without Covid-19 infection during the pandemic in selected rural area of Southern India, Tamil Nadu.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

An extensive literature review was conducted to derive an understanding on the lived experiences of families during Covid-19 pandemic. Studies attest that the Covid-19 pandemic has seriously affected the families which had its member/s diagnosed with the infection. ^{1,3} It has been postulated that the COVID-19 pandemic was likely to cause stress among family members who had a person living with COVID-19 ². A study on family caregiving by members to those who were affected with COVID-19 within the family highlighted caregiver's burden, increased responsibilities resulting in various challenges that affected the finances, psychosocial health and quality of life.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

Phenomenology was used to study the lived experiences of families faced with and without Covid-19 infection during the pandemic. 27 families [17 families faced with (WTH) Covid-19 infection, 10 families faced without (WOT) Covid-19 infection] were purposively selected based on the pre-determined criteria such as families with pregnant women, children or elderly (affected/ not- affected), families with one or more members affected/ isolated/ hospitalized with Covid-19 infection, families with large family size and families belonging to upper/ lower socio-economic class. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out using open-ended, probe and concluding questions to gain insights into the lived experiences of the families. Active listening skills were used to adapt to the flow of the conversation and the interviews were audio-taped. Field notes were also taken to capture the emotional aspects and non-verbal cues during the interview.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS, RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

. The phenomenological data was analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step strategy as described below:

- i) **Familiarization**: All the interviews recorded were played back several times to transcribe the data and get familiarized with the participant's experiences until it was understood well and a sense of complete comprehension and confidence had been reached. The researcher's personal thoughts, experiences, notions and feelings during this exercise was added to reflective journal to avoid any potential researcher bias, thus aiding in thorough understanding of the phenomenon studied.
- ii) **Identifying significant statements**: Significant statements related to the experiences of the families were extracted from each transcript. The statements were grouped by the participant's code and transcript code. Fifty five significant statements were extracted from twenty seven participants. Few of the significant statements extracted are given in the table below:

Table 1: Excerpts of Extracted Significant Statements

Significant Statements	Participant Code	Transcript Code
<p>The entire community said that my husband will not survive, he may not come back home from hospital.</p> <p>But it's a big miracle that he is alive today.</p> <p>His own brother did not come near me thinking that he will get infected. He showed bye at a distance and went away.</p>	WTH 12	B
<p>But, there was lot of fear. Neighbors had stigma. No one spoke with my mother. (Silence and sobbing.....). They (neighbors) thought that they may get Covid, if they talk to her.</p> <p>Even if I wanted to talk to my mother. She would say to go away and be at a distance, which was wounding. She feared if I would get Covid.</p>	WTH 55	F
<p>When my relatives came to know that I was affected with Corona, they did not come to see me. That is the time that I understood about the nature of human beings. I was affected with Covid. But my children were treated differently and badly.</p> <p>My husband used to come and leave the food for me, but would not see me. I also thought that he at least should be alive for my children's sake. (Crying.....) I felt very miserable. I thought of committing suicide.</p>	WTH 82	I
<p>I could not go for work; because of lockdown. Had to borrow money from neighbors for family expenses.</p> <p>I am confident that we can face future adversaries with the help of mutual support from neighbors and friends.</p> <p>My family was safe due to God's grace, even though there was lots of suffering all around us.</p>	WOT 31	III
<p>We as a family spent some time standing closer to plants to get fresh oxygen.</p> <p>We followed all the safety precautions, so we did not get affected with COVID-19 infection.</p> <p>Now that we have seen a pandemic, we need to develop resilience to face future adversaries.</p>	WOT 136	X

- iii) **Formulating meanings from the extracted statements:** The researcher attempted to derive meanings from the extracted significant statements. Excerpts of the formulated meanings are presented in the following table:

Table 2: Excerpts of Formulated Meanings from Significant Statements

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings
<p>The entire community said that my husband will not survive, he may not come back home from hospital.</p> <p>But it's a big miracle that he is alive today.</p> <p>His own brother did not come near me thinking that he will get infected. He showed bye at a distance and went away.</p>	<p>Family member was filled with fear if her spouse would die of Covid- infection.</p> <p>Family member was thankful to God for protection and a miracle.</p> <p>Family member expressed the absence of love and care from own siblings.</p>
<p>But, there was lot of fear. Neighbors had stigma. No one spoke with my mother. (Silence and sobbing.....). They (neighbors) thought that they may get Covid, if they talk to her.</p> <p>Even if I wanted to talk to my mother. She would say to go away and be at a distance, which was wounding. She feared if I would get Covid.</p>	<p>Family member expressed the stigma faced in the neighborhood as one of them was affected with Covid-19.</p> <p>Family member expressed the feeling of being wounded for the inability to be close with loved one due to Covid-19 infection.</p>
<p>When my relatives came to know that I was affected with Corona, they did not come to see me. That is the time that I understood about the nature of human beings. I was affected with Covid. But my children were treated differently and badly.</p> <p>My husband used to come and leave the food for me, but would not see me. I also thought that he at least should be alive for my children's sake. (Crying.....) I felt very miserable. I thought of committing suicide.</p>	<p>Client expressed feelings of hurt by relatives and neighbors as she was affected with Covid-19.</p> <p>Client expressed her disappointments and worthlessness of living due to loneliness.</p>
<p>I could not go for work; because of lockdown. Had to borrow money from neighbors for family expenses.</p> <p>I am confident that we can face future adversaries with help of mutual support from neighbors and friends.</p> <p>My family was safe due to God's grace, even though there was lot of suffering all around.</p>	<p>Client mentioned about the financial strain and need for help.</p> <p>Client expressed confidence in bouncing back to normalcy.</p> <p>Client acknowledged God for keeping the family safe from COVID-19 infection.</p>
<p>We as a family spent some time standing closer to plants to get fresh oxygen.</p> <p>We followed all the safety precautions, so we did not get affected with COVID-19 infection.</p> <p>Now that we have seen a pandemic, we need to develop resilience to face future adversaries.</p>	<p>Client mentioned about activities that boosted the confidence.</p> <p>Client expressed confidence in bouncing back to normalcy.</p>

- iv) **Clustering Themes:** The formulated statements were reviewed extensively and grouped to be arranged into themes. The meanings were grouped into *forty one clusters* and coded with a descriptive thematic label. The cluster themes were further examined closely to form emergent themes that described the overall meaning of the lived experiences of families. The table below shows an excerpt of the arrangement of cluster themes to facilitate the process of deriving the emergent themes:

<i>Formulated Meanings</i>	<i>Cluster Theme</i>	<i>Emergent Theme</i>
Family member was filled with fear if her spouse would die of Covid- infection.	Fear of loss of loved one	Experience of Fear
Family member expressed the absence of love and care from own siblings.	Expression of lack of support from kith and kin	Lack of support from kith and kin
Family member expressed the stigma faced in the neighborhood as one of them was affected with Covid-19.	Stigma from neighbors	Stigmatization
Family member expressed the feeling of being wounded for the inability to be close with loved one due to Covid-19 infection.	Wounded by Covid-19 prevention protocol	Experience of woundedness
Client expressed feelings of hurt by relatives and neighbors as she was affected with Covid-19.	Hurt by relatives and neighbors	Experience of hurt
Client expressed her disappointments and worthlessness of living due to loneliness.	Vulnerable to attempt suicide	Vulnerability
Client mentioned about the financial strain and need for help.	Expression of financial difficulties	Financial burden
Client mentioned about activities that boosted the confidence. Client expressed confidence in bouncing back to normalcy.	Confident of facing the future	Positivity
Family member was thankful to God for protection and a miracle. Client acknowledged God for keeping the family safe from COVID-19 infection.	Thankful to God for safety and protection	Gratitude

- v) **Developing an exhaustive description:** This process involved analysing and merging of themes in order to create a complete structure of the phenomenon that had been studied. It involved the assistance of peer de-briefers by providing feedback of the analysis and facilitating an exhaustive description of the lived experiences of the families that integrated the emergent themes. The integrated themes captured were found to be a) voyage of emotional turmoil, b) building resilience, adaptation and cohesion and c) affirming of faith.

Voyage of emotional turmoil: Facing Covid-19 pandemic was like a voyage of emotional turmoil for families

especially for the ones who had their family members affected with the disease. Navigating through the pandemic

was not easy. Families felt that they were sailing through a vast ocean not knowing its depth nor the distance of the

shore with non-stop waves surrounding them during the Covid-19 pandemic. Waves of fear of contracting the infection, fear of impending death among those infected, loneliness in quarantine, social isolation in lockdown etc mapped this voyage. As we can't stop the waves coming; similarly families experienced a state of intense emotions that led to confusion and distress manifested with the feelings of being hurt, becoming vulnerable, stigmatized, wounded, ignored, neglected etc as they moved against the waves sailing to reach the shore.

Building resilience, adaptation and cohesion: As the families navigated through the rough tides, they were able to become more aware of the situations that led them to get connected, creating healthy and strong relationships, making adjustments and drawing strength from one another, demonstrating competence and confidence in overcoming challenges with a sense of making responsible choices.

Affirming faith: The families learnt to sail amidst all odds by acknowledging the supreme power of God in their lives that led them to reach the shore amidst the continuous emotional turmoil and helplessness. They recognized the goodness of God in their lives enabling them to reach the shore through painful, hard and difficult times

- vi) **Seeking validation of the description:** The researcher discussed the results of the analysis with the participants and verified the findings to validate the data analysed. The participants' agreed on the data conclusion and expressed that the results of the analysis reflected their lived experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- vii) **Revising the description:** The validation of description was followed by expert peer review to attain the congruence of the lived experiences of the families.

V. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Written ethical approval was obtained from the Institutional Review Board of Christian Medical College, Vellore. Written permission from the Head of the Department of CHAD was also sought before the commencement of the study. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants of the study for an audio-recorded in-depth interview. Adequate privacy was ensured during the data collection. Anonymity and Confidentiality of data was maintained throughout the entire period of the study. The data collected was fed into the computer at the earliest and the files were kept secure by use of password protected file.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is determined in the study that families that faced with COVID-19 experienced more challenges in comparison to the families that faced without COVID-19 infection during the pandemic. The in-depth interviews showed ***fifteen emerging themes*** that had been integrated into three major themes viz., a) voyage of emotional turmoil, b) building of resilience, adaptation, cohesion and c) affirming of faith. It is imperative that health care professionals understand the burden of pandemic in the lives of people and bring in the learning to devise appropriate comprehensive strategies in promoting resilience, adaptation and cohesion of families during the times of future adversities encountered by families.

VII. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The author gratefully acknowledges the involvement of participants in sharing their experiences and the study guide in shaping this piece of work. This research was supported by the Institutional Review Board of Christian Medical College, Vellore.

REFERENCES

- [1] Barneveld K V et al.2020. The COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons on building more equal and sustainable societies.
The Economic and Labour relations review. Vol 31 (2). Retrieved from
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1035304620927107>
- [2] Beach et al. 2021. Family Care Giving during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gerontologist, 61 (5), 650 - 660.
Retrieved from <https://academic.oup.com/gerontologist/article/61/5/650/6224747>
- [3] Kaye et al. 2021. Economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic on healthcare facilities and systems: International perspectives. Best Practice and Research Clinical Anaesthesiology, Vol 35(3). Retrieved from
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1521689620301142>
- [4] Walsh F. (2024). Family Resilience: A Dynamic Systemic Framework. Retrieved from
<https://academic.oup.com/book/41117/chapter/350424338> [23 March 2024]
- [5] WHO. (2023). Coronavirus Disease [COVID-19] pandemic. Retrieved from
<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

