

*A Narrative Inquiry of Coping Responses of Selected Deaf College Students in the Philippines During the COVID-19 Pandemic*

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**Abstract**

COVID-19 made an immense impact on the educational system worldwide. The unexpected disruption of face-to-face instructions and the sudden change in the academic curriculum stressed the learning and well-being of Deaf students. However, during the pandemic, their voices were primarily unheard. Therefore, this study aimed to determine the coping responses of selected Deaf college students in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic. This qualitative study employed a narrative inquiry method through in-depth interviews and conversations. Convenient purposive sampling was used to identify the participants. The instrument was a customized interview questionnaire, developed through the guidance of Special Education professors and pilot tested with students with similar interests as those who participated in the research. The transcript was examined, coded, and categorized. Four themes emerged: *overwhelming feelings*, *managing time and responsibility*, *conveying the message*, and *nurturing faith in God*, categorized into reaction, reality, request, and response, analyzed and interpreted using attribution and self-determination theories. The situation during COVID-19 brought overwhelming feelings to Deaf students. To convey their message, especially to their non-signing families, was challenging. However, this situation motivated them to manage their time and responsibilities at home and online schoolwork. Through family support, they accepted and understood the reality of the pandemic. It also opened an opportunity to nurture their faith in God. Further research exploring more profoundly deaf spirituality, resilience, well-being, and coping needs is recommended to give voices to the Deaf, especially during unexpected difficult circumstances.

Keywords: Coping Responses, Deaf College Students, COVID-19 Pandemic, Narrative Inquiry

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## **Introduction**

COVID-19 made an immense impact on the educational system worldwide. Unfortunately, people With Disabilities (PWD) are highly affected in times of drastic and unintended changes (Gleason et al., 2020). The unexpected disruption of face-to-face instructions and the sudden change in the academic curriculum stressed the learning and well-being of Deaf students. In addition, school closure brought hardship, fear, and frustration, leading to unprecedented hazards to students' mental health (Xiong et al., 2020). Sadly, their voices were primarily unheard. Nevertheless, the challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic in their lives must not be overlooked (Goenner, 2021) because despite their disabilities, they, too, are significant members of society.

With COVID-19, isolation became more complicated for students whose family members did not know how to sign and could not help their Deaf kids in their school work. Although some parents knew how to sign, they needed to work daily. As a result, their Deaf children were left alone at home with no one to help them in their online learning. Thus, the emotional challenges that many Deaf students experienced during the pandemic brought immense uncertainty. Their feelings of self-doubt and inferiority put them in a disadvantageous position (Dianito et al., 2021). Consequently, they feel neglected, which affects their well-being and learning.

Many educational disparities hinder health knowledge and the ability to make informed choices (Kutina, 2020). Mitigating the consequences of academic discrepancy will significantly benefit interdisciplinary, interpersonal, and clinical strategies (Campos & Launer, 2020) and improve academic performance (Alshutwi et al., 2021). Thus, policymakers and practitioners should advocate developing unique designs for Deaf students. In addition, Albertini et al. (2012) underscored that personal factors could play a significant role in their academic success. For example, a suitable home environment and parents' positive attitude affect their academic achievement (Wanjiru, 2014). For Daliborka & Boško (2021), there is a difference in their academic successes if active organizations support them.

The marginalization and exclusion of Deaf students have long been an issue and heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their stories need to be heard to bring greater awareness of their feelings and open more conversations to improve the services they need. Therefore, this study sought to answer how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the learning and well-being of Deaf college students and how they cope with the changes brought about by the pandemic.

## **Communication Barriers**

One of the most crucial issues for Deaf people is communication problems because they can often not interact with peers and adults (Pasandideh & Keramat, 2020). The significant communication barriers for the deaf during the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted their learning and well-being require various forms of ongoing support from both their families and schools to ensure that they succeed and benefit from their experiences (Alqraini & Alasim, 2021). Moreover, they have more emotional, educational, and behavioral communication issues (Shalani et al., 2018). For example, most Deaf students expressed their longing for the implementation of teaching and learning in the physical classroom (Zaid, 2021) because the inability of their family members to help them in their understanding detached them from their usual physical undertaking in school. Further, receiving health information contributed to the significant gaps in health literacy. For example, adults who

are deaf were 4.7 times more likely to report difficulty understanding COVID-19 information (Panko et al., 2021). Also, the intelligibility of sign language expressions used on TV or video is unclear or not understandable to the Deaf. Therefore, new terms like COVID-19 and coronavirus needed sign language to be created and used to present the risks and coping mechanisms to the Deaf community (Amorim et al., 2020).

The Deaf community gains access to the technical language for communication and coordination care through sign language. However, the disadvantages of the lack of information in sign language about coronavirus to the Deaf community have confused and resulted in information gaps (Zaid, 2021) and caused panic and stress.

Communication plays an integral part in the lives of the deaf during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the lack of skill in communicating effectively with them left them isolated. As a result, students felt the need to go to school where they could feel community because they could openly express themselves.

### **Coping Responses**

Coping means the cognitive and behavioral strategies to control or manage situations evaluated as stressful (Enns et al., 2018). Coping works the immediate problem with the surrounding environment causing distress and regulating the emotional response to the stress problem (Russo, 2019). Stress is an imminent aspect of the human experience. It is an expression of psychological distress that results from societal pressures that exceed the individual's coping capacity (Ebigbo et al., 2015).

A person's stress level depends on cognitive evaluation, appraisal, and coping (O'Brien et al., 2012). The concept of appraisal refers to a primary evaluation process made by the person when facing an event. When a person considers a situation a threat to their well-being, they make a second appraisal evaluation to assess the coping options available to deal with it (Enns et al., 2018).

However, coping makes a big difference in the adaptation process. Coping is a process that people use to assist them in dealing with stressful stimuli from the environment (Roy, 2011). Innate or natural coping processes are automatic processes that are unintentional, involuntary, effortless, and occur without the person's awareness (Roy, 2014). Moreover, acquired coping processes are developed and learned through deliberate and conscious actions.

How Deaf students cope with everyday stressors are dependent on their environment. They find less stress with people close to them and people they can trust. Conversely, significant coping issues result in a situation not sensitive to people's disabilities.

### **Deaf Experiences**

The negative stereotypes and prejudices on Deaf people held by society and self-stigmatization that often develops within them who are the target of social stigmatization hurt their physical and psychological well-being and participation in activities of daily living (Gagné et al., 2009). How society behaves, shares assumptions, or institutionalizes priorities shows how they value people. Sometimes, "differences in terminology are not inconsistencies but often indicate deliberate choices and perspectives" (Young & Temple, 2014, p. 12). For example, the "d" of Deaf should be capitalized to Deaf when referring to

individuals who use sign language and, at the same time, are part of the community of Deaf (Woodward, 1975). Thus, being Deaf was marked as a linguistic and cultural identity in “the same way as we would mark Polish, English or Persian with a capital first letter” (Young & Temple, 2014, p. 14). Thus, deafness is objectified; it allows it to be talked about as something that happens to people instead of being part of them (Gascon & Ramos et al., 2010). The use of language creates meaning based on people's attitudes and society's stigmatization. The lifestyle standards of the general hearing population have, at times, ostracized and overlooked the unique needs of the Deaf community (Sommer, 2020). In the same way, it risks those with hearing loss becoming increasingly isolated, and the lack of support has been one of the most complex challenges they faced during the pandemic (Grote & Izagarea, 2020).

These challenging experiences of the Deaf college students led the researchers to explore their coping responses during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. Most Deaf students studying in the city returned to their provinces when the lockdown and closure of schools started. However, it became more difficult to sustain their studies because of the lack of resources and the signing households. Also, they feel burdened with their family because things need to be interpreted to understand what is happening around them.

COVID-19 reshaped society and, consequently, access for the Deaf people who relied on seeing mouths and facial cues to communicate. It rendered them vulnerable in ways they were unprepared for and concerned about (Kersten-Parrish, 2021). Nevertheless, their narrative is vital as often their needs fell on deaf ears of people who are supposed to aid them during the pandemic.

## **Results and Discussion**

The researchers used researcher-made interview questions with six participants (P), thus purposive sampling. The transcribed data identified codes, categories, patterns, and themes (Kim, 2016). As a result, four themes emerged: *overwhelming feelings*, *managing time and responsibility*, *conveying the message*, and *nurturing faith in God*. These themes were categorized into reaction, reality, request, and response. The researchers employed attribution and self-determination theories to guide and interpret the study results.

The Attribution Theory originated from psychologist Austrian philosopher Fritz Heider (1946). In their book, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan introduced the Self-Determination Theory and intrinsic motivation in human behavior (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Harold Kelly and Bernard Weiner further advanced this theory. Fritz Heider recognized attribution as a central process of forming subjective interpretations of the world (Malle & Korman, 2013). The theory of attribution deals with how individuals perceive the causes of everyday experience as being either external or internal (Kassin & Markus, 2016). It is the people's perception of what causes the situation (Crittenden, 1989). Explaining an event constitutes an answer to why the event happened. According to Heider, to understand and control the world around them, the events in people's lives are interpreted using consistent and logical modes of sense-making (Manusov & Spitzberg, 2008). One way of expanding the event is by stating what caused the event (Jaspars et al., 1983). It may be caused by factors outside the person's control (external) or perceived as the person's internal (Ryan & Connell, 1989). Understanding the causality opens opportunities to better understand and motivate an individual in specific tasks by increasing autonomy, relatedness, and competence (Turban et al., 2007). As a result, this leads to the self-determination theory. Self-Determination Theory

focuses on the influence of social environments on attitudes, values, motivation, and behavior (Deci & Ryan, 2010) that foster voluntary forms of motivation (Leung, 2019). These are essential for optimal natural disposition, constructive social development, and personal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Its arena is the investigation of people's psychological needs that are the basis of self-determination.

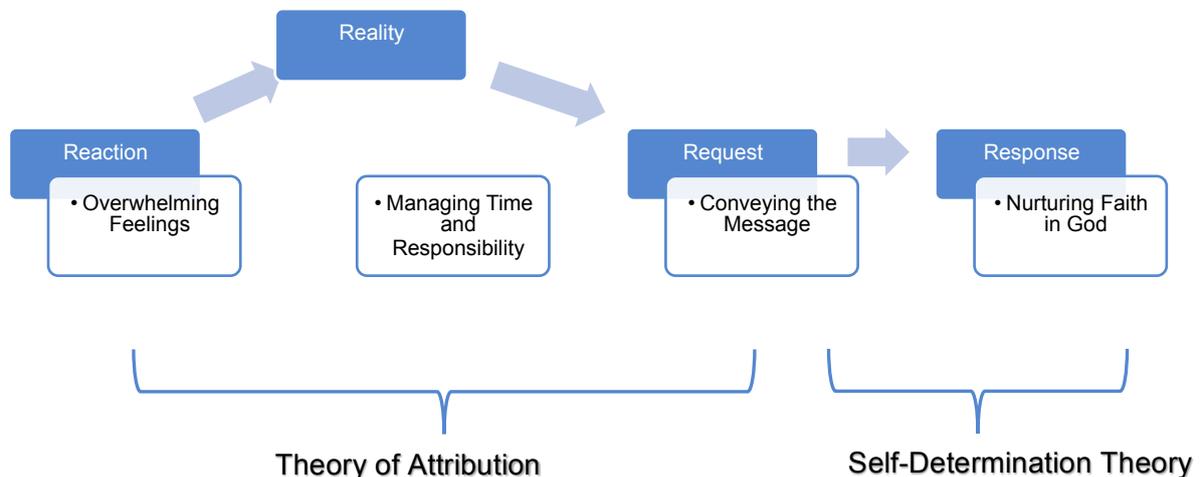


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

*Note.* Employing the theories of attribution and self-determination in analyzing themes and categories

### Unpacking Stories of Participants (P)

The following were the themes drawn from the narrative analysis of data to interpret the participants' meanings of themselves, their surroundings, their lives, and their lived experiences (Kim, 2016). First, analysis implies objectivity, and interpretation implies subjectivity. As researchers, we analyzed what was said, giving evidence for the interpretation (Chase, 2003).

#### Reaction: Overwhelming Feelings

The situation during the pandemic was hard to deal with. As a result, it brought feelings of stress, anxiety, and boredom. As P1 said, "All I have to do is stay at home. As if I could not breathe, I felt sick; there was no exercise, and I got bored." When the government imposed a lockdown, and the schools were closed, the participants were not ready for the situation. Their activities were interrupted, and their routines were challenging to sustain.

Similarly, P2 also experienced the same feelings. He said, "I felt terrible, like a weird feeling. I become hard-headed. I do not have enough sleep and exercise." P3 also felt shocked. He said, "I panicked because I did not expect a pandemic. So, I stayed in the house. Then, I panicked again because, up to now, the virus is still here." Finally, for P4, he expressed that he felt depressed. He said, "Because of COVID-19, I was depressed. It was challenging because I always stayed home, feeling bored and unable to communicate with my

family, and my mind became stagnant. I am sad and sometimes frustrated and overthinking of myself.”

For P5, her aunt's death during COVID made her angry. She said, "I was angry and experienced depression, especially when my aunt died. However, she cared for me and has always been with me in school. Because I am not ready to lose her." P5 added, “Sometimes, there is trauma because I cannot go out. However, nevertheless, I also see many deaths, which is very depressing.”

During the lockdown, many questions also emerged: Why does COVID happen? What will we do? Are we going to look for work? However, how could that be if there is COVID? So how can we budget our expenses? These were mind-boggling situations that contributed to the participants' emotional reactions.

### **Reality: Managing Time and Responsibilities**

The sudden disruption of classes and prohibition of social interactions resulted in difficulty organizing and planning activities. The participants were unprepared socially, emotionally, and academically. However, they found ways to manage their time and responsibilities. "I schedule going to the Church on Sunday, even nighttime," P1 said. Moreover, she also redirected her anxieties by writing a journal. She recounted, “Since we cannot go out, I write a journal about my experiences. Then I go to the Church because I want to move.” Likewise, in doing her schoolwork, she managed to complete her assignments. “I make it a point that I accomplish my tasks. If there is no internet, I find ways to connect. I am also a member of an organization, so I do schoolwork and org work.” P1 said. P4 also finds time to balance his time. He said, “I balance my work assignments, and usually, I do all my schoolwork at night.”

For P3, no time is left wasted. He expressed, “I looked for ways to earn money. I sold different goods.” He is also committed to his academic work. He said, “My assignments and their deadlines are essential. I must finish them early.” He would lessen his stress when he felt overwhelmed with his assignments by ensuring he accomplished his academic requirements. Similarly, P4 said, “If I am depressed, I walk around the house and just keep silent about it.”

Likewise, P2 would go to his province. “I go out sometimes, go to the province, go swimming with my friends if there is an opportunity. There are changes and processes during the pandemic. I do it step by step. I also take care of myself and the people around me.” P2 shared.

Through the lens of attribution theory, the participant's understanding of the realities of the pandemic opened opportunities to motivate them better to be more responsible for their time. Attribution theory explains how people interpret and react to causes of events (Weiner, 1985). Perceived responsibility is central to this model (Weiner, 2006). As P6 said, “I balanced my time in my academics. I always check the deadlines of my assignments. I learned these skills during the pandemic.” P5 also shared that she never goes with her mother to buy stuff at home, but the pandemic taught her to help her mom buy what they need at home”. It was hard for P4 to balance his responsibilities at home and school during COVID, but he improved his work at school and home because the pandemic is already two years. The participants have not wasted time because they did not know when the pandemic would

end. On the contrary, the situation motivated participants to do their responsibilities at home and school.

### **Request: Conveying the Message**

To be understood by someone was challenging for the Deaf participants because their family members were not skilled in using sign language. P1 said, “My family members are not signing. They only use gestures, especially my parents. But I have a sister, and she is also deaf, so we understand each other well”. P1 expressed how difficult it was to communicate with her mother and father.

For many Deaf children, fitting into the hearing world is difficult (Harmon, 2013). As a result, they struggle to fit into their parents' culture (Hamilton & Clark, 2020). P3 shared, “It is challenging for my parents to sign. Since they are working, they no longer have time to learn sign language. They are already old, so it is difficult to learn sign language”. He also said that his parents communicated with him orally. He reads their message through lip-reading.

For the participants who rely on lip-reading, wearing masks prevented them from reading the conversation. P4 shared his difficulty communicating with people wearing masks while selling goods during COVID. He said, “We have a small business. I sell goods to save money when I go back to school, but it is difficult to communicate with customers wearing masks.”

P2's family is hearing and uses fingerspelling when they communicate with him. However, he said there is often miscommunication in the family because their message is unclear. P2 said he would just go to his room or leave the house. He feels depressed when his family does not understand him and hopes to learn to sign.

Deaf participants would easily express themselves with their friends or classmates through video conferencing. As P4 said, “I find school activities hard to understand, especially the word instructions in the assignment. I prefer to ask my friends rather than my family or sister because of difficulty in communication. I get answers immediately with them, rather than with my family.” Conversely, P5 kept silent, feeling frustrated when she could not fully express herself to her family, who were not signing.

Although it was challenging for the participants to communicate with their families because they were not signing, they were grateful for the support and love of their families. They accepted that they could not wholly share with them using sign language. However, they were assured of their love and support, especially during the pandemic. They would sacrifice work to provide for their basic needs while studying from home. P3 said, “My father does not have any time to learn sign language, and I accepted that. My father needed to sleep early and work the next day. That is how he loves his family”.

Attribution theory's heart is the affirmation people continuously pursue to explain events they encounter (Graham, 2020). The struggle to communicate with hearing family members is a continuous challenge for deaf people. However, they maintain a strong connection among family members during the pandemic amid this difficulty.

## **Response: Nurturing Faith in God**

The pandemic made the participants more aware of their relationship with God. God's presence was felt through their communion in prayer. It gave them the space to communicate with Him bringing their questions, fears, and hopes. This aspect of their lives allowed them to reflect on the situation they could not control. Their faith in God motivated them to hope for a COVID-free tomorrow.

## **Conclusion**

The narrative of the coping responses of Deaf college students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines has uncovered different realities of weakness and vulnerability that resulted in pain, loneliness, and isolation. However, it also brought joy and assurance, knowing they were never alone in their struggle.

Communication has always been a significant barrier restricting the Deaf from conveying their message. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, where all students were in remote learning, the lack of family members' training on sign language caused so much harm to the Deaf students' well-being. The inability to express their feelings and thoughts resulted in a more profound silence that only they could understand. It was a lonely experience knowing they were in their own homes with their loved ones.

The scenarios of death, unemployment, and financial crises increased anxiety and depression. In addition, the struggle to connect with schoolmates, teachers, and friends was challenging. Deaf participants could not grapple with what they saw and experienced. However, the love and support that they received from their families wiped out their suffering. Despite the silence, they dealt with the challenges of the pandemic together. Although their family members may not be competently communicating with them using their language, they have also demonstrated their love and support for them. Moreover, their faith in God gave them hope to continue living. For them, God is a friend, a mother, and a companion, assuring them that He listens to them.

The stories of the Deaf students call for a more charitable attitude and solidarity with them. It is a reminder that everyone is valuable and that their voices are essential, no matter how silent it is.

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