

Gains and Losses: A Phenomenographic Study on Adolescents' Understanding of Isolation Due to COVID-19

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Abstract

The global health emergency posed by the COVID-19 outbreak has affected millions of people. In the Philippines, among the establishments closed were schools which resulted in children and adolescents staying at home for more than two years under quarantine. Many studies were conducted focusing on the impact of isolation due to quarantine on people's physical and emotional well-being, most notably the children and adolescents who are considered vulnerable individuals. However, limited studies investigated how these young people understand their experiences while in quarantine. Hence, this phenomenographic study aims to explore the different ways Filipino adolescents understand their isolation experiences. Seventeen adolescents in quarantine were interviewed, and qualitative analysis revealed an outcome space where isolation is seen in the light of gains and losses as described through a hierarchy of expanding awareness of the different dimensions of isolation. The descriptions reveal understandings that isolation is (1) a restraint, (2) a necessity, and (3) an opportunity that has an impact on the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of adolescents' lives. Implications and recommendations presented may serve as a basis for designing programs and interventions to help adolescents deal with possible negative feelings while in isolation and post-quarantine.

Keywords: Isolation, Adolescents, Phenomenography, COVID-19, Pandemic

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Introduction

The worldwide health crisis due to the outbreak of COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of millions of people. Without the available cure and before the development of a vaccine, most countries see lockdowns, quarantines, and extreme forms of physical distancing as means of containing the transmission of the contagion (Leung, 2020). In the Philippines, among the establishments closed are schools which resulted in children and adolescents staying at home for more than two years (De Guzman, 2021; Lopez, 2022). The government mandated that Filipinos whose ages are below 21 years were not allowed to leave their residences being considered part of the at-risk group and have continued their education through distance learning (UNICEF, 2021; Dela Cruz et al., 2021; Republic of the Philippines Inter-Agency Task Force, 2020). The pandemic-induced lockdowns which are also referred to as quarantine in this paper have resulted in the social isolation of Filipino adolescents.

Isolation poses an enormous challenge to people's physical and emotional well-being, most notably children and adolescents who are considered vulnerable individuals ("Adolescent mental health", 2022; Singh et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2021). The inability to stay active and feeling anxious about the uncertainties brought about by the infectious disease outbreak are among the identified adverse results of the confinement. Mental health conditions such as anxiety and depressive symptoms are expected to be elevated due to prolonged social isolation. Even isolation that may even be less than ten days may result in long-term effects on mental health (Brooks, et al, 2020, as cited in Pietrabissa & Simpson, 2020). These mental health issues are commonly associated with exhibited emotional patterns and coping ability with problematic situations.

On the other end, lockdowns due to COVID-19 have presented opportunities in different systems such as the positive environmental impact due to limited fuel consumption due to travel restrictions and reinventing education by prioritizing authentic learning (Arora et al., 2022; "Education and COVID-19: challenges and opportunities", 2022). On a personal level, being in quarantine has allowed individuals to reflect and rethink the practices of doing things in areas of personality development and schooling.

Hence, this study aimed to explore the different ways in which Filipino adolescents understand their isolation experience. As the quarantine measures were ongoing, it was crucial to probe their understandings of their situation to know how to help them deal with possible negative feelings while in isolation and after being quarantined. Although this study's findings could not be generalized, they may serve as a basis for designing programs and interventions promoting adolescents' mental health concerns. More so, this will give an insight into the general mindset and attitude of Filipino adolescents towards social isolation.

Methods

This study investigated the various understandings of adolescents about isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, a phenomenographic study was adopted as an approach that aims to describe the different ways in which people understand, view, perceive, or experience a phenomenon. Its focus is not just on the understanding of the meaning of the phenomenon but on the variation of the understanding of the phenomenon (Larsson & Holmstrom, 2007). It focuses on the collective experiences, and not on the individual experiences of the participants. It is interpretivist which adheres to the notion that there are several acceptable interpretations of realities (Akerlind et al., 2005).

This phenomenographic study utilized purposive sampling to investigate the understandings of a specific group of people, specifically, Filipino adolescents who were under quarantine due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There were seventeen adolescents enrolled in an online class in a private senior high school in the Philippines who participated in the study. They were selected as participants based on the following selection criteria: (1) age range is between 16 to 19 years old; (2) bonafide students at the selected school locale; and (3) whose parents provided consent for their participation in the study. The participants have an 11:6 female-to-male ratio. The participants' demographic profiles maintain sufficient diversity as required by phenomenographic studies (Trigwell, 2000, as cited in Khan et.al, 2019). The goal of diversity in the sample is to increase the chances of finding variation in the meaning or understanding of the participants.

The data collection approach used in this study involved the conduct of written and oral semi-structured interviews. The open-ended questions asked were intended to draw out views and descriptions of the experiences of the adolescents while in quarantine. The data were collected from March to December 2021 when the participants were still restricted from going to public places and only allowed to attend school in an online environment. Participants' responses were collected through an online survey form with open-ended questions and virtual interviews which lasted for more or less 30 minutes per participant via Zoom, an online videoconferencing platform. The oral interviews were recorded with due consent.

The phenomenographic analysis of this study centers on the “what” and “how” of the participant’s isolation experience. However, it is important to note that the analysis consists of searching the transcripts for similarities and differences in the participants’ responses (Akerlind et al., 2005). The data is analyzed collectively and not the individual transcripts to extract the pool of meanings, the related expressions of the youth about their understanding of isolation which are distinct from other expressions, that were the bases for identifying categories and outcome space (Holmqvist & Selin, 2019; Stolz, 2020).

The analysis of the obtained data followed the protocol of Sjöström and Dahlgren (2002, as cited in Khan, 2014) which began with the iterative dialogue between the text and the researchers through the structured reading and rereading of transcripts for familiarization. The next step involves the compilation of responses based on their similarities and differences. Relevant and meaningful statements are then extracted from the compilation which is called the condensation stage. This is followed by the initial grouping of meanings from responses into categories of qualitatively different ways of understanding the phenomenon. These categories are compared to each other to refine their boundaries before naming them based on their key characteristics. Lastly, an outcome space is drawn out based on the internal relationships between the categories in the form of a hierarchy. In this study, the hierarchy of expanding awareness of the different dimensions of isolation is presented.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to the onset of the study, the researchers sent an electronic Parents’ Consent Form to explain to parents the purpose, nature, and potential risk of the study and sought their permission to allow their children’s participation in the research. As soon as parental consent was secured, target participants were sent the electronic form of Child Assent, e-survey forms, and the Zoom login credentials and interview schedule. In both electronic instruments and interviews, the following were emphasized: the aim of the study, voluntary participation

in the study, privacy considerations, and the right to withdraw from the research at any time. Confidentiality, anonymity, and careful handling of data were given utmost priority in carrying out this study from data collection, processing, storage, and publication.

Results

The analysis of the transcript identified three different ways in which adolescents understand isolation. These ways of understanding reveal that adolescents view isolation as (1) a restraint, (2) a necessity, and (3) an opportunity.

Isolation as a restraint

Some Filipino adolescents perceive isolation as a restraint. This sense of restraint is observed to impact the physical, emotional, and social dimensions of the adolescents' lives in different forms such as limitation of physical movement, social disconnection, regression in well-being, and deprivation of opportunities. These cited descriptions are all ways in which restraint is experienced.

For example, with the face-to-face classes being suspended because of the lockdowns and adolescents were not allowed to leave their residences as part of the measures of the government-imposed community quarantine, some participants expressed how isolation has restricted their physical mobility and development. When asked to describe their experiences, some pointed out that:

“ara lang kami sa limited space na makahulag... Daw ara ka sa dome... di ka pwede mag gwa...ang amon condition sa lawas like nadula na... kay wala gid kami gahampang... just pungko, tubang sa laptop sa online class.”

(There is limited space for movement... It is as if you are inside a dome and you can't get out... Our physical condition has regressed because of inactivity... I just sit around and face the laptop to attend online class.)

“Since student athlete po ako, bigla din po nagstop and training ko. Nagbag-o gid sya tanan, ma'am.”

(I used to train as a student athlete, but my training suddenly ceased [because of isolation]. It changed everything, ma'am.)

“It was very uncomfortable... di kami maka kuha sang food... indi kami makagrocery... To be honest ma'am, I feel caged because I feel like I am limited to the house only. I cannot go back to the way things were na free ka to go outside and want to do the things na pwedeng gawin outside your house.”

(It was very uncomfortable... we cannot get food nor go to the grocery. I cannot go back to the way things were. I cannot do the things that I want to do outside the house.)

In addition, isolation is seen to have a limiting impact on the social and emotional well-being of adolescents. The disappointment over this form of restriction is articulated as:

“I think this pandemic affected my mental and emotional health because of isolation and less physical interaction with my friends.”

“Basically, since the start of the isolation, I have felt na it affected my social life, mostly. I am a very outgoing person na I prefer going out with people... and communicating with them. Since nagka-pandemic, I was not able to meet new people, interact with other people... [it’s] suffocating.”

(Basically, since the start of the isolation, I have felt na it affected my social life, mostly. I am a very outgoing person and I prefer going out with people... and communicating with them. When pandemic happened, I was not able to meet new people, interact with them and it is suffocating.)

“Medyo restricted na ang pag meet sang friends so daw maka ano sya ma’am, maka-sad kay technically diri lang gid sa balay... sa mga meet ups, sa mga gatherings with family and friends, may impact man sya kay di ka maka meet up sa family and friends as often as you’d like.”

(There are restrictions when it comes to meeting friends which saddens me. I just stayed home. It has affected how frequent I meet family and friends since gatherings are not allowed as you’d like.)

Restraint is also experienced by some adolescents through deprivation of opportunities. Some adolescents vented that:

“Super disappointing po since that time po maglalast year na po kami sa high school. Then all the experience na dapat maexperience namin as a high school student di po nangyari such as yong mga balls po indi namin naranasan... at yong graduation namin indi din po namin naranasan since bigla lang po talagang naglockdown. It all happened sa age na when I am supposed to live as a youth outside the world, but it all happened inside my house for almost three years... three years pa lang damu-damo na nadula.”

([It was] super disappointing because [COVID-19 isolation] happened on the last year of our high school. We missed all the things that we should have experienced as a high school student such as the balls... and we also missed the graduation because of the abrupt lockdown. It happened when I am supposed to be living my youth with the world, but it seemed to pass while staying at home for three years... for the past three years, a lot of things were lost.)

“Sa part ko na di natuloy ang ball at moving up ceremony, parang nakaka devastate po... Tapos knowing na hindi na kami makabalik ng school, parang di po natapos ng maayos yong experience ng high school life. Parang ganyan ang feeling. During that time po ako ang alumni president so ako ang nag spearhead ng preparation, knowing na hindi na matuloy yong events, na shock din ako na hindi sya fulfilling sa part ko po.”

(Missing the moving-up ceremony is devastating for me... and being unable to go back to school makes my high school experience incomplete. I was the alumni president then and we were preparing for the event [graduation ball]. I was shocked that it was cancelled, and it was not fulfilling on my end.)

Evident from the statements is the general feeling of loss that resulted from the sense of restraint from being isolated. The constraints due to physical mobility, social connections, and prospects have resulted in an adverse feeling of loss that needs to be addressed for it may harm the adolescents’ mental health and well-being.

Isolation as a necessity

Some Filipino adolescents view isolation as a necessity. Despite perceiving isolation as a restriction that affects their mobility, socialization, and chances of experiencing things, some Filipino adolescents also understand isolation as essential in ensuring one's safety and a crucial means of curbing the spread of the infection.

“I do find it hard to assess my emotions. I sometimes want to think about the situation as a rational individual and not as someone who is openly feeling this way or that way because I do find myself having a deep connection with those thoughts that I have. And sometimes I will not get into a good decision or a good point if I let it get into me. So as much as it's not really good to block out your feelings, I do try to be more rational when it comes to thinking. Picking an alternative that would be how I describe my isolation experience... I do understand it now. For me, isolation is more of like the definition given by COVID - separating yourself from people for safety...”

“I have anxiety while on quarantine. When I feel the need to encourage myself, I often say that, “It's okay” or “Everything's gonna be alright”. I remind myself that staying at home is for my own good. These thoughts are enough to lift my mood and help me get through the day.”

Despite the experienced restraint, some adolescents acknowledge that being isolated is a necessity. This understanding emerges as adolescents attach meaning to their experience – that is putting into perspective that the isolation experience is a necessary step to ensure one's safety.

Isolation as an opportunity

Some Filipino adolescents perceive isolation as an opportunity which is an awareness that stems from the understanding that while isolation leads to restraints, it is necessary. For example,

“[Being on quarantine] did not go that well from the start. So yes it was really hard for me to adjust. I was able to adjust po in the sense that it was really necessary for me to understand that this is how things are going to be starting from this point... I had really modified my ways and eventually, I did cope with it... I am really proud of myself because I really had that emotional understanding of myself... I tell myself I am really proud of you because you made the most out of the situation... And understanding yourself and some things that are lacking around you for you to grow.”

Being isolated paved the way for self-reflection and self-discovery, personal development, and improving family relations. When isolation is seen through the lens of its meaning, restraints are viewed vis-à-vis the opportunities that arise from it. Implicitly expressed, the consciousness of the adolescents that isolation is the logical course of action for safety leads to the recognition of the opportunities emerging from the situation. For example,

“This pandemic has affected me in a way that I was able to make some realizations out of it, out of me and out of the people around me. With the time I spent at home, I was able to self-reflect with the actions I have committed in the past or to simply put, my life as a whole really. I was also able to make up for the lost time I never got to

spend with my family. Even though we're just at home, we try to look at the positive side of things or just being optimistic. All in all, in a time of darkness and despair still being overshadowed by the gleaming light of faith and hope, we should believe that out of all this, we certainly have more to gain than to lose.”

“I think that isolation as a COVID-19 response is an effective move. Aside from it helped us minimize the spread of the virus, it also opened us to a new things which I believe are useful in today's time. I would like to stress out the fact that isolation brought us an in-depth knowledge with the different online tools and gadgets-something that we might not have learned about if isolation never happened. It also taught us to build resiliency. Being under the influence of a global disaster, it can't be helped that we worry or grieve upon the losses, but with isolation, we learned to seek comfort within ourselves; thus, a strong solitude is also built during these days.”

“If I were to think back on my experience during the quarantine brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, I would find it to be advantageous in some way. I characterize that worthwhile experience as miserable but rewarding. I have accomplished a lot at home throughout the pandemic, particularly in terms of developing my creativity abilities through the creation of digital artworks, paintings, and drawings. I used to work on portrait commissions back then, which increased my productivity. By employing my skills in developing digital publication materials, it further expanded my opportunities to be a leader and a campus journalist at school. In addition, I have even learned some fundamental exercise techniques, and I follow workout routines. Nevertheless, even with all that productivity. I can't help but admit that it was a dreadful experience as well. There have been days when I have had severe insomnia and cannot fall asleep, staying up for over 24 hours. Interacting to friends were not the same as before. I made some new friends and lost some others. Additionally, it was difficult to go entire days or even weeks without speaking to anyone. With both good and bad times interspersed with those experiences, I get the conclusion that it was both rewarding and miserable.”

“I think this experience has brought new changes po especially tulad before may mga bagay po ako na hindi magawa pero nung nagquarantine na ganito na po ang set up parang mas nahanap ko po ang time na gawin yong mga hobbies na hindi ko nagagawa usually... hindi po ibig sabihin na natigil yong usual na ginagawa natin, natigil din yong progress natin. Kung baga new opportunity lang po sya for growth po.”

(This experience has brought new changes which gave me a break to do my hobbies. It does not mean that because some of the things we do are halted, our progress has been discontinued as well. This has been an opportunity for growth.)

Viewed as an opportunity to rest, reflect, learn about oneself, and rebuild relationships, isolation is being seen on a positive note. This understanding arises from the awareness that despite the constraints, isolation is needed for safety.

The Outcome Space

This study aims to explore the different understandings of Filipino adolescents regarding their experience of being isolated during the COVID-19 pandemic. The result of this research

reveals the internal relations of the three emerging categories – isolation as a restraint, a necessity, and an opportunity.

Isolation as a restraint is the basic understanding Filipino adolescents attach to the phenomenon of isolation. The experienced various forms of restraint are the immediate observable consequences of prolonged social isolation.

However, the awareness that isolation poses restrictions can lead to an understanding that it is also a necessity. It is through the consciousness of the negative consequences of restraint that some Filipino adolescents can also see it as necessary as they make sense of the phenomenon. Isolation is seen as an important course of action to ensure safety. This view about isolation emerges as one copes with the challenges of being isolated.

Recognizing that isolation is restricting but is key to safety, a new level of awareness of isolation comes to light – as an opportunity. The ability to see the realities of being in isolation provides clarity in thinking and mindset which allows one to be optimistic about it regardless of the circumstance.

These three ways of understanding can be organized in a hierarchy of expanding awareness of different dimensions of isolation as shown in the figure below.

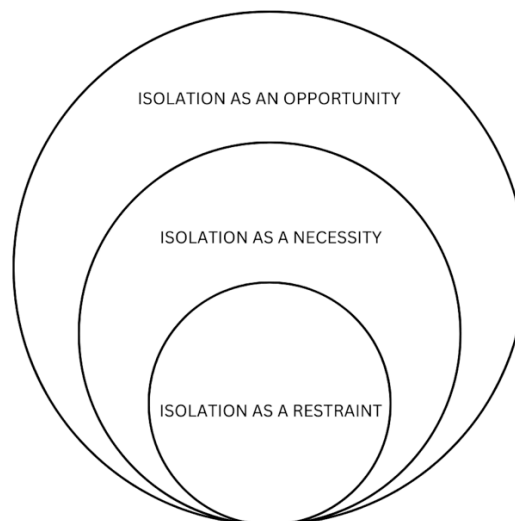


Figure 1. The outcome space for the research

Implications

The hierarchy of expanding awareness of different dimensions of isolation as seen through the lens of Filipino adolescents presents a crucial point of reflection. For some Filipino adolescents, the isolation experience may simply be viewed as a restraint that leads to a sense of loss. This feeling of loss may lead to worsened mental health unless interventions were given to help them undergo the coping process (O'Keefe, 2021). These interventions are suggested to be meaning-centered or focusing on meaning-making for they were cited as helpful in coping and adjustment for someone who is dealing with loss (Lichtenthal et al., 2010). According to Nadeau (2008, as cited in Walsh, 2020), the meaning-making process or putting in perspective the sense of loss makes it endurable.

Thus, Filipino adolescents whose view of isolation is simply a restraint must undergo a process of meaning-making as an intervention to allow them to expand their view from restraint to opportunity by acknowledging that their isolation experience is a necessity. It is when adolescents attach their isolation experience to a meaning – isolation is necessary – that they can accept their loss, make it bearable, and allows them to deal with the difficult changes in life (Rimiru & Mokua, 2020). It when adolescents see their isolation experience as a necessity that they are also able to expand their awareness that isolation may also lead to opportunities.

On the other hand, the findings of this research also revealed that Filipino adolescents' perception of isolation is seen in terms of its consequences on the life of young people. Isolation as a restraint is seen as a loss while isolation as an opportunity is seen as a gain. But noteworthy is the view that isolation is a necessity that allows adolescents to see positive impacts not just the negative effects of isolation on their lives. The understanding that isolation does not only result in losses but leads to gains exposes how Filipino adolescents respond to difficult situations such as quarantines. This study's findings provide insight into Filipino adolescents' mindset and attitude when confronted with challenging situations such as isolation during a pandemic. Filipino adolescents, while acknowledging the problematic situation, can remain optimistic about being in isolation when they attach meaning to their experience. The view that isolation is seen as an opportunity, or a gain is a manifestation of adaptability and resilience among Filipino adolescents. The observed optimistic thinking of Filipino adolescents may be attributed to their ability to reflect on their experiences and attach meaning to them. From the studies of Trivate, Dennis, Sholl and Wilkinson (2019) and Falon, Hoare, Kangas and Crane (2022), the ability to self-reflect is seen as an effective mechanism for an individual to cope with difficult and stressful situations like dealing with losses.

Nonetheless, it is important to identify measures and strategies on how to process the feeling of loss that these young people harbor to avoid long-term adverse impacts on their overall well-being. Thus, professional support must be given in schools to address the said concern.

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