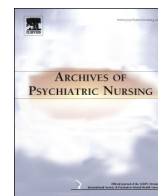




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An Analysis of Stories From Those Who Have Encountered Catastrophic Loss From Flood

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ABSTRACT

Analyzing stories from those who have suffered catastrophic loss from flood may offer a means to better understand recovery of the survivors from their perspective. The purpose of this research was to examine the lived experience of those who faced catastrophic loss from flood. Stories were gathered from eight participants, who experienced catastrophic loss of home and possessions resultant of massive flooding. Following analysis, three “turning points” were identified within the story plot which included: Facing the devastation, Embracing the rebuilding, and Developing inner strength. Themes within the turning points were identified demonstrating transformational perspectives of self and world.

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Thousands of Americans experience catastrophic loss due to natural disaster annually. According to the NOAA's National Weather Service (NWS) Office of Climate, Water and Weather Services (2016) extreme weather accounted for nearly 4.85 billion dollars in property damages, with approximately 2.1 billion dollars attributed to flash and river flooding in 2015. In addition to financial burden, many survivors of such disasters require physical and emotional support that may continue for years (Cerdà et al., 2013; Tone & Stone, 2014).

Emotional consequences resultant from catastrophic loss can occur through loss of personal identity and delayed psychological recovery in those affected by natural disasters (Chan & Rhodes, 2014; Rateau, 2009). These mental health consequences were evident following the Hurricane Katrina disaster, which produced unprecedented and devastating floods in August 2005 (McLaughlin et al., 2011). Since Hurricane Katrina, there is supporting evidence that suggests a clearer understanding is needed regarding the long-term emotional impact, and subsequent mental health support for survivors of natural disaster (Warsini, Buettner, Mills, West, & Usher, 2015).

It is important to understand the health impacts of those who have experienced material losses from natural disaster. Negative mental health effects including depression and anxiety often increase following such events (Hussain, Weisaeth, & Heir, 2011; Yokoyama et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). The duration in which these effects continue and interventions designed to provide long-term support warrants further exploration (Thordardottir et al., 2015).

Stories illuminating the survivor's perspective may be integral in understanding the recovery process for those experiencing catastrophic

loss from flood and in developing appropriate long-term support for survivors. Specifically, qualitative methods for exploring and analyzing the phenomenon are needed to better understand the meaning of loss from the perspectives of people experiencing it. This study lends support to the body of literature by illuminating the disaster survivor's entire story from the beginning of the flood to the present allowing for each participant to validate his/her experience. The context in which the stories were told and analyzed, can influence long-term emotional support provided to disaster survivors and ultimately care of those needing assistance for recovery.

A consistent finding noted in the literature involves the factors associated with psychological or PTSD symptoms in survivors of natural disaster. Findings reveal significantly higher levels of negative psychological symptoms or PTSD in survivors of natural disaster where there was loss of property and/or home, loss of electric, water, and food services, or when injury of self or a loved one has occurred (Gros et al., 2012; Qu et al., 2014; Zwiebach, Rhodes, & Roemer, 2010). Further, literature suggests that specific coping styles and level of support given to survivors of natural disaster can influence overall recovery (Wahlström, Michélsen, Schulman, & Beckheden, 2008).

Another important finding involves the survivor's ability to view the disaster experience as a positive life influence allowing for personal growth and a transformed view of self and the world (Oldham, 2013; Raholm, Arman, & Rehnfeldt, 2008). In these instances, survivors reflect upon their experience as a positive, life-transforming occurrence. These occurrences can assist in a change of meaning of self from the disaster event.

Little research exists, guided by nursing theory on the lived experience of catastrophic loss from flood. This represents a gap, since most research has not considered this area of inquiry for exploring the

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meaning of catastrophic loss following natural disaster. The purpose of this research was to analyze the structure of meaning in stories of those who have lived through the experience of a flood event where catastrophic loss has occurred.

METHOD

Study design

The research question guiding this study was “Through analysis, what are the turning points in stories from persons who have lived through a flood where there was catastrophic loss?” The phenomenological method fits the purpose and scope of this study. The underlying premise of this method is exploring the meaning of the phenomenon of interest as it is viewed by the person who has lived it (Connelly, 2010; Giorgi, 1985).

Participants

The sample included eight individuals who experienced substantial loss of material possessions and/or residential property due to a single flood event. The flood event occurred in the Western Pennsylvania and Northern West Virginia regions because of torrential rains caused by Hurricane Ivan in September 2004. Criteria for inclusion were: age 18 or older, ability to speak fluent English, free of any condition producing impairments in cognition or speech, and existence of material and/or property losses from flooding during the Hurricane Ivan storm. Participants verified displacement from the primary residence for a minimum of 8 to 12 hours. This verification was important in determining material/property damage severity when considering catastrophic loss.

Ethical considerations

Prior to beginning the data collection process, approval was obtained from the University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Applications for approval were submitted according to IRB requirements. Application for approval met the exempt review since data were collected via audiotape and potential participants were subject to no more than minimal risk.

Recruitment and enrollment procedures

Recruitment of participants took place in cooperation with a local chapter of the American Red Cross Disaster Services Volunteer Coordinator and Disaster Action Team (DAT) volunteers. All persons interested in participating in the study contacted the researcher via telephone during which all questions were answered and a meeting time and place were established.

Data collection

Demographic data including age, sex, marital status, and time of displacement from residence were collected prior to beginning the conversation. Conversations were loosely structured to allow participants to tell their flood experiences beginning with the day of the flood, moving to the rebuilding process, and finally to present and future times. The lead question used to begin the conversation with all participants was: “I understand that you were involved in the flooding that took place as result of Hurricane Ivan in 2004. I would like you to think back and tell me how the day began?” As the stories unfolded, other questions were used to move the participant through their story.

Data management

Conversations were audio taped in their entirety using the story path process, a facet of story theory (Smith & Liehr, 2008), leading the

participant through the flood experience from the beginning of the day, through the flood event and rebuilding process, and finally to the present and future time periods. Each story was transcribed verbatim by a transcriptionist and later verified for accuracy by comparing the transcript with the audio taped interviews.

Participant anonymity was maintained by assigning each story a number and letter. Story codes were matched with participant phone numbers and kept in the event future communication was needed. To insure participant anonymity, phone numbers and story codes were destroyed after the researcher completed all processes of data analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis encompassed distinct phases which are congruent with both the phenomenological method of inquiry and story theory (Smith & Liehr, 2008). According to Smith and Liehr (2008), the three interrelated concepts of intentional dialogue, connecting with self-in-relation, and creating ease compose story theory. This middle range nursing theory fits well with the purpose of this research as it relates to gathering stories of people who have experienced catastrophic loss from flood. When applied to the research setting, the nurse researcher's focus is on the participant and the story being told while completely engaging in the moment.

The following phases were followed in the analysis of data:

1. Getting a sense of the whole by dwelling with each story.
2. Discriminating meaning units to organize the beginning, middle, and end of each story.
3. Transforming participant language to the language of the researcher.
4. Identifying themes of the lived experience.
5. Synthesizing a structure of meaning of the lived experience.

These phases are an iterative process, repeating back and forth in the analysis of the data. Each phase moved along in this analysis process ending with the explication of the study findings.

The incorporation of important principles from the phenomenological approach with story theory offered a method for acquisition and analysis of stories collected from the research participants. The use of the participant's story served as a significant link between the phenomenological method and story theory and is critical in the meaning making process of a significant life event (Smith & Liehr, 2008). Through dialogue, the researcher encouraged and supported the participant to describe his/her lived experience.

FINDINGS

The structure of meaning analyzed through the lived experience was clarified through three turning points across all eight stories. The turning points of Facing the devastation, Embracing the rebuilding, and Developing inner strength, represent equal, integral pieces in describing the structure of meaning during the flood experience. Fourteen sub-themes were identified within the turning points, which describe important story events related to the turning point. For the purpose and scope of this paper, short excerpts of participants' stories are used to represent the turning points and associated sub-themes and discussed below:

Facing the devastation

Themes identified within the facing the devastation “turning point” are reflective of the meaning of the experience from the participant's perspective within the time from beginning the day in a usual manner to being witness to massive flooding, and subsequent destruction of home and property. The following excerpts are representative of the themes within the facing the devastation “turning point”.

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