

SONGS OF A CAGED BIRD: A GLIMPSE INTO THE BEING OF YOUTH INSIDE THE PRISON SYSTEM

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Abstract

Understanding young inmates' experiences are essential since their lives have been shaped by the impact of social exclusion. This study aimed to explore the meaning of the lived experiences of young adults inside the prison system. The phenomenological inquiry was utilized, which is grounded in Martin Heidegger's philosophy. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 to 29-year-old inmates incarcerated for at least one year. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, four themes emerged: An Unfamiliar Melody (with two subthemes: Humming with Frustrations and Tunes of Solitude); The Eyes Outside the Cage; Turning Over a New Feather; and If My Wings Unclipped. The "songs" of the caged bird tell about the "meanings" of restricted freedom--from being able to dip its wings in the orange sun rays down to being tied in chains. Being held inside a prison limits a person from experiencing life as they should. Opportunities to soar high were taken away. The consequences caused them the fragility of emotions: frustration, loneliness, and humiliation; yet, they still have a speck of hope.

Keywords: frustration, phenomenology, prison system, young adult prisoners

Abstrak

Nyanyian Burung dalam Sangkar: Sebuah Pandangan terhadap Kehidupan Remaja dalam Sistem Penjara. Memahami pengalaman narapidana berusia muda sangat penting karena kehidupan mereka yang terdampak oleh pengucilan sosial. Tujuan penelitian ini untuk mengeksplorasi makna dari pengalaman hidup orang berusia dewasa muda di dalam sistem penjara. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan fenomenologis yang didasarkan pada filosofi Martin Heidegger. Pengumpulan data menggunakan metode wawancara semi-berstruktur dengan narapidana berusia 18 hingga 29 tahun yang sudah dipenjara setidaknya selama satu tahun. Berdasarkan analisis fenomenologi interpretatif, muncul empat tema, yaitu: An Unfamiliar Melody (dengan dua subtema: Humming with Frustrations dan Tunes of Solitude); The Eyes Outside the Cage; Turning Over a New Feather; dan If My Wings Unclipped. "Nyanyian" burung dalam sangkar yang menceritakan tentang "makna" kebebasan yang terbatas—mulai dari mencelupkan sayapnya di bawah sinar matahari hingga hingga diikat dengan rantai. Kondisi dipenjara membatasi seseorang untuk menjalankan kehidupan sebagaimana mestinya. Peluang mereka untuk terbang melambung tinggi dirampas. Hal ini menyebabkan emosi mereka rapuh: frustrasi, kesepian, dan penghinaan; tetapi, mereka masih memiliki setitik harapan.

Kata Kunci: fenomenologi, frustrasi, narapidana dewasa muda, sistem penjara

Introduction

For quite a long time, the prison has been seen as the home of the world's criminals and outcasts (Wacquant, 2001). It is viewed as an establishment for keeping people without wanting to, started in the most remote past (Barnes, 1972). The disciplinary actions given to offenders were embraced by the detainment of convicts for a

period dependent on the type of the wrongdoing (Liwana, 1970). Upon the foundation of the present Philippine Republic, thoughts of restoration began to be supported. In 1949, the Department of Justice issued rules for the treatment of detainees, which pointed, among others, at the recovery of the criminal. In this way, the motivation behind the jail framework was not only to rebuff the wrongdoing but rather to restore or

redress the criminal (Albis et al., 1977).

Currently, prisons hold many youthful detainees for a year or more. More than 50,000 young adults in the Philippines have been captured and kept since 1995. The assessed absolute number of youthful grown-ups aged 18 to 29 in prisons or correctional facilities has been expanding constantly. Prisoners have consistently resisted a one-of-a-kind arrangement of possibilities and weights to which they were required to respond and adjust to survive the prison experience (Wacquant, 2001). The individuals who are imprisoned speak to the most minimized, socially marginalized, socio-financially hindered, and “weak” of society. Their lives have been formed by the effect of social avoidance. Besides, other issues, they are liable to be individuals from an ethnic minority group, have limited education and a background marked by insecurity, unemployment or underemployment, substandard eating routines, and lodging conditions, and sub-par restorative access (Edgar, 2019). Living in this environment implies that they should figure out how to fit in with the tenets of the prison itself, as well as of alternate prisoners that make up their new society (Munn, 2011).

Spending time in prison can negatively affect a youngster’s future (Barnert et al., 2017). This study aimed to explore the meaning of the lived experiences of young adults inside the prison system. Understanding the experiences among young adults amid imprisonment is crucial, as most of these detainees will one day be released. To fully understand what it feels like to be circumstantially imprisoned behind bars at a young age, the researcher considered an exploration of the lived experiences through phenomenology. Young inmates who have been incarcerated for no less than one year were chosen to be the informants of the study to provide a great deal of insight into the prison experience. We must supplement the aspects of incarceration in a deeper, richer, and more transcendent nature, thereby enabling the informants’ voices to be heard and expressed to the public, with the researcher serving as their mediator.

Methods

The phenomenological approach, grounded in Martin Heidegger’s philosophy, was chosen to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of the meaning of the lived experiences of young adults inside the prison system. The data gathering occurred within the premises of a detention and rehabilitation center in the province of Cebu, Philippines. During the data gathering process, the informants were interviewed separately in an isolated room to minimize distraction, maintain confidentiality, and promote security. The researchers interviewed four inmates who were invited and accepted the invitation. To provide the research with a great deal of insight into the prison experience, a purposive selection of the informants was used. The informants were young adult inmates, 18 to 29 years of age, who had been incarcerated for at least one year. In compliance with the utilization of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), the selection of informants was based on non-probability purposive sampling, which targeted a particular group of people, rather than random or representative sampling. Purposive sampling was utilized because it is well suited to the qualitative design chosen, and it involved purposefully selecting individuals with a wide range of variation on the dimensions of interest. This meant that it entailed including offenders with different viewpoints about the phenomenon under study (Polit & Beck, 2021; Chesnay, 2015; Pringle et al., 2011).

To facilitate data collection, we served as the medium for preparing, initiating, guiding, interpreting, and validating the exchange of data among the informants in a 30–60 minute interview. The study utilized semi-structured interviews as a flexible data collection instrument, with the main question “Narrate to us a typical day inside the prison”. In this way, the researchers were able to explore more about the experience and maintain a sense of direction and flow while going through and understanding the phenomena. Sufficient time was allocated to collecting data to guarantee the saturation of impor-

tant categories. Field notes were made to ensure credibility and trustworthiness and audit trailing was done to preserve the sensitivity of the topic. A fictitious name was given to each informant to ensure confidentiality of data and maintain their privacy. The study also utilized an audio recorder and word processing software. The audio recordings and transcriptions were stored in a secure box that only the researcher could access. Only the research team and the informant were allowed to view and edit files about their interview. All the raw and unanalyzed data were destroyed two years after the final research paper was approved.

We looked for themes in the first case since IPA has a step-by-step approach to the analysis. The transcript was read several times, and the left-hand margin was used to annotate what was interesting or significant about the informants' speech. Researchers' triangulation was utilized in all steps of the analysis. The researcher and viewer deliberated with each other about their perceptions and interpretations twice immediately after the interview and after reading and rereading the transcription (Pringle et al., 2011).

The transformation of initial notes into themes was continued throughout the whole transcript. As the process continued with all informants, the researcher repeated the procedure, only with a different time and setting. The data from each time corresponding to the informant were then compared, contrasted, and associated to create a final representation of the particular informant. The same process was employed for the remaining interpretations. After the construction of the final representation of each informant, all data

were analyzed as a whole. Similar themes emerged as the researcher advanced through each process. At this stage, the entire transcript was treated as data; therefore, no attempt was made to omit or select particular passages for special attention. The number of emerging themes reflects the richness of the particular passage.

Results

The understanding of the experiences of young adults inside the prison system was taken from four informants. Table 1 contains each informant's demographics. Through the analysis utilizing IPA, after a series of reflections and immersion of the experiences of the informants, four themes emerged from the entire research process.

The first theme is *An Unfamiliar Melody*, where the "caged bird" sings with a fearful trill of the things unknown. It talks about how it was when the informants first entered the "cage" or prison cell. They faced a lot of uncertainties about what was ahead of them. From this, two subthemes emerged, namely, *Humming with Frustrations* (which reveals their set of emotions grimed with despair) and *Tunes of Solitude* (which focuses on how imprisonment took away their liberty, and their chance to be with their families). The second theme, *The Eyes Outside the Cage*, refers to society's stigma and judgments that the informants are facing, thus insinuating feelings of embarrassment and a sense of social seclusion. The third theme is *Turning Over a New Feather*, which describes inmates' new image after having been detained and experiencing different challenges inside the cage or prison cell.

Table 1. Informant Demographic

Pseudonym	Sex	Age	Length of Incarceration	Crime Charged
Jennifer	F	23	16 months	Drug Trafficking
Arianne	F	20	21 months	Theft
Giovanni	M	27	39 months	Murder
Blake	M	29	86 months	Rape

It speaks about how the phenomenon changed and molded their character after they felt a wide array of emotions. The fourth and last theme, *If My Wings Unclipped*, hears the serene whispers of hopes on the grave of dreams behind the bars of rage.

Theme 1: “An Unfamiliar Melody.” First entering the “cage” or prison can be a daunting flight, especially for young adults. On clipped wings and tied up with chains, the caged bird opens its throat to sing with a frightful trill of the things unknown. This theme talks about their voices describing the unfamiliar path that they were forced to take, a place where their liberty was taken away, and a place unversed to them the “cage” or prison. This theme narrates how imprisonment brought changes in the young prisoners’ lives and how they made sense as a prisoner.

Subtheme 1: Humming with Frustrations. When the bird is unable to spread its wings to fly and express the true meaning of life, its feathers inevitably begin to waste away, thus losing its gloss. Whether one realizes it or not, it takes time for a person to get used to an accustomed condition. Imprisonment compels a person to make many changes such as the limitations and boundaries set by the facility. The bird can no longer leap on the back of the wind or dare to claim the sky. Altogether, these frustrating things put the bird in a cage of unwillingness, in jail of suffocation as if the bird is tied up with chains and freedom is taken away. The informants expressed how upset they felt. They were dismayed with the notion of being locked up, and with their frustrations, they compared life in prison to that of a chicken.

Being a little bird trying to flap its broken wings but still ending up flightless bends their emotion, giving them a feeling of frustration. When trapped inside a dark chamber, caught in a grave of broken dreams, the dark clouds seem to cover its sight, leaving behind only a blurry vision. They can hardly see the light, worrying about what is to come. They barely realize what

their feathers are made for, incapable of breaking free. This was how Blake tried to express his feelings when inside the prison.

Subtheme 2: Tunes of Solitude. When the inmates spend every single day far from their loved ones, they cannot help but long for every detail from their support system. Even simple gifts from informants’ loved ones can make them happy. Informants appreciate even the tiniest efforts from their family just to see and spend time with them. However, Jennifer could not help but cry after every visit. Although things are different for Arianne, whose parents have abandoned her and her child because of her imprisonment, this does not exempt her from thinking about her family.

The informants assuming roles as sons, daughters, husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers of their own families have been affected by their imprisonment. They constantly miss their loved ones especially throughout the time spent away from them. What is usually expected of them by society as providers for their children is no longer met, as it is impossible to earn enough money to support them. They cannot monitor what happens outside or witness the growth of their children. They must leave all their responsibilities to the people they left behind, most likely their partners, brothers, sisters, and parents.

Meanwhile, being incarcerated for a given period, good bonds between co-inmates formed, and moral relationships were established. As Arianne described the head of their cell as motherly, she could not help but look up to her. Blake and Giovanni also treat the other inmates as their brothers.

Theme 2: “The Eyes Outside the Cage.” Due to the crimes the incarcerated people have committed, we simply cannot deny that they are often judged and stereotyped. People are prejudiced by the social stigma brought by being imprisoned; they form biases about different individuals, which made the informants confused and embarrassed. One should explore and know

the reasons behind why such an unlawful act was done rather than focusing only on the crime that was committed. This will help one to understand the reason behind their imprisonment.

Jennifer shared her sentiments about how people viewed prisoners. Whether you are in prison or not, we are all people, as she claimed. She hated how people stereotyped them. Giovanni, who committed multiple murders, stated that he is not that brute person. He shared, “This is already my second time. But I am not a bad person”. He also admitted that he has killed many of those who were wrongdoers of their place.

The emotions they felt had pushed them to commit a crime. They felt hopeless and thought that an unlawful act was the only way to escape the dilemma. Being consumed by the emotions brought by those dilemmas led them to do such an unlawful act, and the consequences later affected their lives. Most of them regretted what they had done that led to the downfall of their life.

Theme 3: “Turning Over a New Feather.”

The caged bird, amid trial and difficulties, turned over a glossy feather, a new image after having learned and realized the values of being alone. Jennifer, for example, realized a lot of changes in her life because of her current situation. Giovanni also seems to relate to Jennifer’s experience. For him, the institution helped him mold his character. Inmates have become better people than they once were. Looking back to the past, Arianne could not help but compare herself to now. She recognized how unkind she was before. Imprisonment helped her acknowledge her mistakes. Informants could not help but relate their situation with their religious beliefs. It has reconnected their principles and strengthened their relationship with God. Arianne then added how different her life is today compared with her life before incarceration.

Theme 4: “If My Wings Unclipped.” As for Jennifer, she has no other plans after her release but to spend time with her family. She wanted to catch up with everyone, especially her child-

ren. Blake also positively thinks about his future. No matter how degenerating it feels for him to be in prison, he is still looking forward to his release. Becoming rich when release is also what also Blake aspires to. However, after years of begging God for his release, Blake decided to stop believing that He is real. He became devastated that God did not grant his wish.

Discussion

Being held inside the four corners of the prison can limit a person from experiencing life as they should. It is a place where boundaries are set, limitations are established, and freedom is restricted (Barnert et al, 2017). Like a bird when captured, its opportunities to soar high and spread its wings were taken away. With clipped wings and tied feet, it lives within the confinement of its cage learning only things as far as its eyes could see. Being young adults detracted from their ordinary life and being put inside the jail environment, the stressors that go with it make it hard for them to modify. Stress is neither the physical incitement nor an example of physiological, behavioral, or subjective responses; rather, it is the relationship between an individual and the earth. The idea of examination, which expresses those passionate reactions (for example, stress) relies on the genuine desires that the individual will show regarding the importance and the result of a particular experience (Davies, 2017; Krohne, 2002).

The principal sort of evaluation is the essential examination; alludes to when an individual chooses if the danger is critical, a positive experience, a risk, hurt, or a test. This choice can result in feelings, for example, outrage, alarm, nervousness, blame, disgrace, misery, jealousy, envy, and sicken or joy, pride, help, and love. The informants communicated dread, tension, blame, and misery as they experienced the new world inside the jail. These feelings were realized by turning into a remote being in a situation new to them. It is unavoidable for them to stress about their lives, as they face life inside the jail with vulnerabilities. Vulnerabilities incorporate

what might transpire when they live inside the jail, what might happen to their families outside, how they can adapt to being secured in a building they are not acquainted with, and how they can deal with all the difficulties they will confront. Maxwell et al. (2013) also recommended considering the social and emotional wellbeing of the prisoner that became vulnerable.

One of the most treasured values kept by Filipinos involves maintaining a close tie within the family. Good communication, effective decision-making, and the required support given to each other strengthen this bond. Being locked up inside the prison, it is arduous not to miss their loved ones. The family dependably holds an imperative part of the riddle. Without it, the world is inadequate, and individuals cannot simply pound the pieces together to fit that is how precious family is. Every day spent living alone and away from their families never fails to make the informants doleful; they feel the distance between them and their families. Family is the fundamental unit of society that ought to make and manage a situation, which advances passionate and physical wellbeing and mental prosperity for its members. The family unit is also a dynamic social support system where readiness to accept reintegrating inmates back into societal and home life (Bertulfo et al., 2016). To fulfill this function, families should know how to foster, provide, inspire, safeguard, instill, create boundaries, and structure, and work together as a one. Filipinos mostly treasure the value of family in all aspects of life. According to Dr. Murray Bowen's theory on the family process, the family is the basic emotional unit in society, which is composed of interconnected beings that affect their functioning as a family (The Western Pennsylvania Family Center [WPFC], 2014). An individual is never isolated within a family where interconnected roles maintain the process. Normally, a family develops certain patterns influenced by the behaviors and roles of each member. When one function is dysfunctional, it may maintain the stability of the patterns established or may dis-

turb the normal process of equilibrium within the system.

Reasons for committing a crime include greed, anger, jealousy, and pride. The desire for control, revenge, or power will result in violent crimes, such as murders, assaults, and rapes. Violent crimes usually occur on an impulse when an emotion increases (Law Library-American Law and Legal Information, 2014). One could also be possessed by anger and harm someone without realizing it.

Solitude, on the other hand, may set people free, and that is the beauty of it. It allows people to shut themselves out from the world and focus on themselves, yes, themselves alone. Most of the population might consider prisons just buildings where criminals are imprisoned and denied of their liberty while serving a sentence for wrongdoing. While this is genuine, the idea of imprisonment is additionally planned to rehabilitate detainees. It is depression that attracts one to be closer to God. It takes a person who is sentenced to wrongdoing and has them sit inside the jail cell to get consideration. Numerous detainees read the book of scriptures since they must be permitted to peruse books and sit in front of the television during their imprisonment. Being inside the prison is monotonous, so detainees read the Bible and other profound books to give them solace.

A qualitative study by Kozlov (2008) uncovered prisoners' expectations and goals for their future. Indeed, even those accused of life sentences discuss plans after discharge from jail. Keeping trusts and dreams, later on, keeps them grounded. A lot of feelings that a detainee may have and issues that should be fathomed. A prisoner has their unique path to survive and continue to solidly proceed with what they had in the past. Despite everything, they have the tirelessness and determination to satisfy their fantasies in life (Kozlov, 2008). The troubles inside the jail did not upset them to free trust that they will be free some time or another and have a superior life (Jones, 2016).

Conclusion

In light of the results of this study, it is never enough to see the superficial aspect of a phenomenon. The songs of the caged bird, or the meaning the young adult prisoners hold, speak more about it in terms of understanding the world to which it belongs. Being held inside the four corners of the prison or “cage” limits them from experiencing life as they should. It is a place where boundaries are set, limitations are established, and freedom is restricted from dipping their wings in the orange sun rays down to having their wings clipped and tied in chains. It is a grueling undertaking for them to embrace changes, and the consequences they faced caused them the fragility of emotions. They had simultaneous feelings of frustration, loneliness, a speck of hope yet still entrapped with people’s judgments and stigma. Based on what unfolded, the researchers recommend that sharing about inmates’ experiences inside and outside the facility would be a great step towards change and acceptance. It would be an avenue for them to express their feelings and be better understood by the people not just in prison but also in society.

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