The efficacy of social capital in assisting survivors of natural disasters deal with distress: the case of survivors of Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper was to find out the efficacy of social capital in assisting survivors of natural calamities to deal with psychological grief. The study used the descriptive design within the qualitative paradigm as the participants were afforded the opportunity to describe the felt psychological distress. The population was drawn from Cyclone Idai survivors in Chimanimani district in Manicaland, Zimbabwe. Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. A sample size of 15 participants was determined by the saturation level which occurred when the participants were repeatedly giving the same responses. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interview questions were used as data collection instruments. The data were classified into themes, categories and sub-categories. The study found out that Psycho-social support services should be aligned to the survivors' cultural norms and values for them to be relevant, meaningful and sustainable. It was also found out that survivors were able to build confidence, self-awareness and hope through receiving encouragement from relatives, friends, neighbours and family members. The findings can provide a platform to lobby for the formulation and implementation of national mental health policies to assist the survivors of natural disasters to deal with perceived distress especially in the Zimbabwean context.

KEY TERMS: *Cyclone Idai, efficacy, devastation, distress, embodiment, fragile, physiological, traumatised, Chimanimani, Zimbabwe*

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INTRODUCTION

The unexpected episodes of natural calamities leave a lot of damages especially among the human beings. It is essential to institute migratory measures to redress the devastation effects of the natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and pandemics such as COVID-19. The purpose of this paper is to find out how survivors of natural calamities especially in the African context deal with perceived psychological distress. The study used the descriptive design within the qualitative paradigm as the participants were afforded the opportunity to describe the felt distress. The onset of catastrophic natural disasters such as cyclones leaves survivors with traumatic stories to tell. Thousands of survivors are left in a state of shock as lives are lost; infrastructure and property destroyed within a short space of time. This paper covers the background, statement of the problem, reviewed social capital related concepts, methodology, data presentation, discussion, conclusion, recommendations and reference sections.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The onset of natural calamities causes extensive damage and leaves survivors traumatised and struggling to deal with the trauma. Lives are lost and infrastructure is sometimes swept away. Some of the natural disasters such as floods leave survivors in a state of shock having psychological sense of insecurity. The survivors find it difficult to comprehend and come in terms with horrific experiences. They experience a sense of loss, grief and sometimes, succumb to suicidal ideation. They need to be assisted to deal with the perceived psychological distress. The social capital provides an embodiment of cultural norms and values which can assist survivors to deal with perceived psychological distress.

Social capital serves as an epitome of indigenous knowledge, skills and experiences of community members (Ajagbe & Ewane, 2018). Relief decisions and services are aligned to the survivors' cultural norms and values of dealing with distress. The failure to consider the cultural contexts of the survivors renders the relief effort irrelevant and oftentimes destructive. For example, in the context of Chimanimani Cyclone Idai survivors, it is culturally expected to offer relief services to the children, elderly, frail, women and men respectively.

The conception and implementation of social capital is influenced by culture. The cultural orientation of the society contributes to differences in the level of trust, acceptance and opening up among the community members (Agbiji & Swart, 2015). In a collectivist African society, the group needs are prioritised and considered as more prominent than the individual needs. Lack of awareness on natural disasters and pandemics can sometimes lead to stigmatisation and discrimination of the survivors. The survivors are side-lined and find it difficult to deal with the grief of the experienced trauma. Very few studies have been done on the efficacy of social capital in the context of Zimbabwean culture (Chanza, Siyongwana, Bruinders, Jakarasi, Mudavanhu, Sithole & Manyani, 2020). It is upon this background that the study seeks to address the gap by coming out with culturally aligned mental health enhancing strategies that are more meaningful and relevant to Africa especially in the Zimbabwean context.

The study drew its theoretical framework from the concept of Ubuntu. Tutu (1999) viewed Ubuntu as an understanding of what it means to be a human being in the context of feeling sympathy, compassion and mutuality to those experiencing affliction and tribulations. The concept of oneness is built upon the notion of supporting each other in times of tribulations, sharing and collective resolutions of perceived obstacles. Strength is derived from trust and reciprocity which enhance human dignity. Moloketi (2009) described Ubuntu as built upon the principles of brotherly and sisterly solidarity, care, protection and cooperation. The pain and suffering of survivors of cyclone Idai prompted feelings of compassion, sympathy and care as enshrined in the concept of Ubuntu.

The aim of the current study was to find out the efficacy of social capital in assisting survivors of natural disasters deal with distress with specific reference to survivors of cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe. The study objectives were to explore the felt distress experienced by survivors of Cyclone Idai in Zimbabwe, identify the role of social capital in assisting survivors of Cyclone Idai to deal with experienced distress and find out the role of culturally aligned counselling services in assisting survivors of Cyclone Idai to deal with perceived distress.

 The study findings can be of great help in building a strong base for psycho-social support in the context of the survivors' cultural settings. The culturally aligned mental health enhancing programs are more meaningful and relevant to the survivors of natural disasters. The findings can provide a platform to lobby for the formulation and implementation of national mental health policies to assist the survivors of natural disasters to deal with perceived distress especially in the Zimbabwean context.

Social capital

Social capital in the African context

Social capital refers to the interconnectedness of community members which promotes positive aspects of community life. The level of civic engagement is high and community interests are given first preference. There is respect of community wisdom and knowledge which is shared by the group members. The interpersonal relationships are strengthened by sharing common values of trust, justice, generosity, reciprocity, friendliness, compassion and forgiveness. The group members actively and voluntarily help each other especially when disasters strike. Decisions are collaboratively made for the interests of the whole society. The group members inspire each other to provide warmth, care and love for the injured. Social capital reignites the lost hope and confidence of the survivors of disasters such as cyclones. In a socio-centric African society, the pain of one is regarded as the pain of all members. The injured are able to share their painful feelings and grief with the other members of the society. The survivors are encouraged to accept and exercise positive thinking patterns irrespective of the painful experiences.

Social capital from other parts of the world

According to Nugormesese (2005) and Kasara (2017), social capital consists of informal values and norms shared among group members. This contributes to the promotion of cooperation, trust, reciprocity and conveying of solace sentiments during times of grief. The resources are collectively mobilised and channelled towards the distressed survivors. This contributes to a sense of belonging, identity and regaining of the lost sense of hope. Miruka and Omenya (2009) posit that social capital is comprised of structures which facilitate the mutual interdependence. This facilitates the elevation of the depressed mood states as a sense of bright future is enkindled. The members of the society are more co-ordinated and can assist those who are traumatised. Aju and Beddewela (2020) posit that initial help during the early phases of the disaster emanates from the social network ties inside the community itself before the external community comes in. Social capital serves as an informal source of protection and cover which revitalise the sense of courage and optimism among the survivors of natural disasters.

Social capital provides long term psycho-social support to the survivors of natural disasters and pandemics. Mutedzi, Langhaug, Hunt, Nkhoma and Harding (2019) concur that district-level relief committees are unable to offer continuous long-term relief services. Social capital in the form of local members of the community lives with the survivors and offer assistance in the aftermath of disasters where necessary. They know how to assist them to deal with the grief of loss. The survivors are motivated to exercise self-care, self-awareness and ideal coping mechanisms. The survivors are also emotionally supported and assisted to dispel fear (Islam & Walkerden, 2014; All-Kama & Hassan, 2018). The survivors who are in a state of confusion and shock find it difficult to rationalise their thinking and behaviour patterns. They are emotionally fragile as they count the incurred loses of lives, property and infrastructure. The close knitting social capital ties facilitate the gradual emotional regulation and rationalisation of behaviour and thinking patterns.

Social capital proved to be successful and useful in Japan after the 1995 Kobe earthquake (Jacobson & Stein, 2018). The fellow community members removed the debris from fallen walls which were trapping victims. The subsequent episode of earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011, found the resurgence of social capital in the form of neighbours, friends and relatives providing rescuing services and psycho-social support to the survivors. Following the devastating earthquake in Nepal in 1934, social capital offered relief services in the form of counselling the survivors and consoling those whose relatives had lost lives. The social capital also helped in the distribution of relief aid to the earthquake survivors. In the African context, social capital was successfully utilised in Mozambique following Cyclone Eline floods in 2000 (Reason & Keibel, 2004). The worst affected places were Tsokate and Hoyohoyo. Social capital is also visible in the form of fellow community members who courageously assisted the victims to regain hope, self-confidence and a sense of belonging.

Social capital enabled the swift spread of information which prompts quick rescuing services. The vital information provides clues of the needed assistance and suitable strategies of providing help to the survivors. The formal dissemination of relief information becomes increasingly difficult following natural disasters. Cyclone Idai cut off power and communications in Manicaland province, along the border with Mozambique. The pivotal role of social capital was reiterated by Ngenyam, Miles and Gordon (2019) who assert that natural catastrophe destroy all types of capital, human, economic, but social capital is the least damaged in a disaster. Social capital therefore provides an important component of restoring hope to the traumatised survivors. The relatives, neighbours and friends give information of for example missing persons, the lives lost, the relief aid needed as well as encouragement to the survivors.

METHODOLOGY

The study used the descriptive design as the participants were afforded the opportunity to describe the experienced psychological distress. The feelings could not be empirically quantified and could be understood and captured by using the descriptive design. The study population was drawn from Chimanimani district which was the epicentre of Cyclone Idai in Manicaland province, Zimbabwe. Initially the researchers sought permission from the gate

keepers namely the local councillor, traditional chief and Chimanimani district administrator of which the permission was granted. The participants voluntarily consented to participate after the researcher explained to them the purpose of the study.The residents of Chimanimani were highly traumatised as they were directly in the path of marauding Cyclone Idai. It is from this consideration that the rich source of data for the study could be drawn from.

Purposive sampling technique was used in the study. The participants were requested to fill in an autobiographical questionnaire. The following information was provided age, sex, address and marital status. The autobiographical questionnaire helped the researcher to identify the groups of the participants, namely age distribution, number of female and male participants, address and marital status of the participants. A sample size of 15 participants was determined by the saturation level which occurred when the participants were repeatedly giving the same responses.

Semi-structured interview questions were administered and permission to record the responses was sought and given by the participants. Focus group discussion was also used to collect data and the participants had a focus group checklist. The data from semi-structured interview questions complemented with data from focus group discussions for triangulation.

The data analysis procedure was informed by the research design as outlined below:

- The data from semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions was grouped into themes.
- Themes were divided into sub themes.
- Related sub themes were linked and integrated into categories and sub-categories.
- The final stage was the conversion of data categories into an account.

The study participants gave a written informed consent before participating in the study. Issues of confidentiality, voluntary participation and withdrawal from research were considered in the study.

RESULTS

Participants information

There were 15 participants who took part in the study. The sample size was determined by the saturation level which occurred when the participants were repeatedly giving the same information. Pseudonyms in the form of capital alphabetical letters were used to protect the identity of the participants. A total of five participants aged between 19 to 30 years while two participants were in the age range of 31 to 42 years. There were five participants aged between 43 to 54 years and those who aged 55 to 66 years were two. Only one participant was above 66 years old. There were nine male participants and six were female. Of the 15 participants, eight were married, three were not and four were widowed.

Themes and categories
Common themes, categories and subcategories were identified as illustrated on Table 1 below.

Table 1: Themes, categories and subcategories

Themes	Categories	Subcategories
Social cohesion	Interpersonal relationships Social connectedness	Belonging
Acceptance	Encouragement	Optimism Life experiences
Information dissemination	Local community members	Shared language
Contextual cultural values	Collectivism	Cultural norms and values

Table 1 shows that four themes were identified namely social cohesion, acceptance, information dissemination and contextual cultural values. Categories derived from the themes are also illustrated on the above table. The categories are namely interpersonal relationship, social connectedness, encouragement, local community members and collectivism. The categories were divided into subcategories as illustrated in Table 1. The subcategories were belonging, optimism, life experiences, shared language, cultural norms and values. Social cohesion theme was formed on the basis of community ties and relations which connect members of the community together. The social cohesion theme cultivated a sense of belonging and provided strong social bond or attachment. The need to be accepted constituted another theme as this fostered a sense of social identity. The community members encouraged each other to be optimistic and this reinvigorated a perception of bright future irrespective of the experienced calamities. Information dissemination was done using the indigenous language

highly understood by the local members of the community in Chimanimani district. The contextual cultural values represented the other theme formed on the notion of group solidarity. The solidarity reminded them that the grief of one was equally a shared concern of the whole community.

DISCUSSION

The autobiographical information of the participants showed that there were 3 more men than women who volunteered to participate in the study. The gender roles of women and men are culturally determined in the African context and women were usually left with the burden of nursing and caring for the victims. According to Care International Zimbabwe (2019), women were overwhelmed by culturally aligned responsibilities such as searching for food, fetching water for domestic use and cleaning the debris. The overwhelming household responsibilities of women left limited time for them to spare and come out as participants. The participants had different age groups which contributed to varied responses except for young children whose parents denied them to take part. Related findings were made by Mutsaka, Dlugosz, Kanike, Harris and Juillard (2019) that participants of different age groups provide different views essential for triangulation purposes. The different perceptions on the efficacy of social capital to assist survivors of natural disasters were elicited. The marital status of participants varied and had a bearing on the level of received social capital assistance especially on the aftermath of the disasters. Those who were married had family members who could provide psycho-social support unlike those who were widowed and not married.

Social cohesion played a pivotal role when natural disasters struck. The residents were caught unaware and had to depend on their friends, relatives, neighbours and the external community to rescue them. The social capital invigorated a sense of courage in the midst of devastating natural disasters such as strong winds, torrential rainfalls and pandemics. Similar sentiments were put across by Chanza, Pakama, Siyongwana, Bruinders, Jakarasi, Mudavanhu, Sithole and Manyani (2020) that social networks in Chimanimani played a pivotal role in providing rescuing efforts and served as a sense of hope to the traumatised survivors. Their survival hope was hanged on their fellow community members. In a bid to restore normalcy, social capital in the form of professional counsellors, local traditional leaders and religion leaders provided some counselling services. This was meant to assist the survivors to deal with the trauma and resume a normal life. Nhapi (2019), however, argued that poor rural members of the community cannot afford to pay for the professional mental health services in Zimbabwe. Irrespective of the given argument, social capital remained an essential form of assisting the survivors to deal with distress. The presence of other supportive members of local community brought a sigh of relief to the survivors who had lost hope. They felt secured, loved and had a sense of belonging which built confidence.

Grappled with fear, the survivors were struggling to control their emotions. Emotions were expressed differently but were all showing the deep pain of loss which the survivors were going through. The effort was made for survivors to accept the loss as a reality and part of life experiences. In the African context, the grief of one is regarded as the grief of all and therefore the survivors were asked to accept the losses and move forward with life. Chirongoma, Shumba and Dube (2019) gave the assertion that being driven by the concept of Ubuntu; the community members were spurred into action to alleviate the pain, suffering, losses and brokenness of the survivors of cyclone Idai. They provided solace, sympathy, care, warmth and protection. The survivors were encouraged to control their emotions and direct their energy towards reconstructing their lives. Acceptance of reality promoted peace of mind and the resuscitation of logical thinking and behaviour patterns.

The smooth flow of information becomes difficult when a disaster struck. Information can be catastrophic if it is not authentic. It can worsen the distress and do more harm than before. It was the relatives, friends, neighbours and sometimes survivors themselves who served as sources of information. The spreading of information prompted swift responses from different relief organisations. The successful dissemination of information brought a sigh of relief and assurance that help was eminently coming. The participants built composure and became optimistic that sooner or later they were going to be rescued. As put across by World Vision Zimbabwe (2019) that local members of the community took leading role in strategizing rescuing plans especially for those marooned by flooded rivers. They were knowledgeable on how to manoeuvre some dangerous territories during the rescuing mission. A sense of self-awareness and belonging was gradually built as relief organisations and other community members responded positively to the disseminated information.

In an African context, community members are bound by collectivism cultural values. The culturally aligned traditional songs and dances were used to console and restore the original sense of belonging among the survivors. Conceptually linked to the principle of Ubuntu put across by Tutu (1999), the family members, friends and relatives who shared the same cultural values played a crucial role as they assisted the survivors to deal with grief. The expression of condolences by reciting totems, lineages and descendants names was built upon the cultural values of the survivors. This was done to remind those in mourning that they were not alone but also part of the other fellow members. As also put across by Dadzie (2019) that the members of the community stood by the survivors of cyclone Idai in providing comfort, solace and relief. The level of trust and acceptance nevertheless, differed as local members were trusted and accepted more than those who came from elsewhere.

It is however, important, to note that some community members attached stigmatisation to mental illness. They regarded mental illness as irreversible and needs not to be disclosed to mental health professionals such as counsellors. The survivors of natural disasters were susceptible to mood disorders such as depression. Intervention programmes could be hindered as the survivors were not reluctant to talk about the felt mental illness due to stigma. Related findings were made by Reuben, Kidia, Machando, Crooks, Mangezi, Abas, Katz, Thornicroft, Semrau, and Jack (2016) that due to held cultural beliefs which perpetuate stigmatisation, mental illness is widely under-appreciated in Zimbabwe. This implies that the traumatised survivors of cyclone Idai were not at easy to disclose the state of their mental conditions. Some awareness programmes to educate the community were necessary to dispel the stigmatisation attached to mental distress.

From this discussion, these conclusions are made:

- Social capital assists the traumatised survivors to build a sense of security and belonging.
- Survivors are able to build confidence, self-awareness and hope through receiving encouragement from relatives, friends, neighbours and family members.
- Psycho-social support services should be aligned to the survivors' cultural norms and values for them to be relevant, meaningful and sustainable.
- The involvement of professional counsellors on psycho-social support can help survivors to deal with traumatic events.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Psycho-social support plays a crucial role in the socio-centric African context in assisting traumatised survivors to deal with distress. It is essential for the survivors of natural disasters to be given the opportunity to express their emotions, talk about their traumatic experiences and even ask questions. This can help the survivors to resolve the perceived distress and deal with the grief of loss. The survivors, however, should not be forced to open up when they are not yet ready to do so. They need to be shown warmth, care, respect and empathy but not be overprotected for them to develop a sense of self confidence. The culturally aligned counselling strategies are sustainable and meaningful among the survivors. The use of indigenous language promotes social cohesion and trust among the community members. It is however, essential, for community counsellors to have basic counselling skills to avoid more harm than before to the traumatised survivors. In consideration of foregoing conclusions, the future studies should look at mental health impact of natural disasters in the midst of pandemic outbreaks such as COVID-19. The use of action research in future can be helpful. This can assist to provide immediate solutions and quick relief to the survivors of catastrophic natural events.

CONCLUSION

In the African context, and especially in Zimbabwe, moments of grief and sadness are shared by family members, relatives, friends and the wider community as a whole. The victims get solace and comfort as the pain of one is regarded as the pain of all. Social cohesion and fabric are highly valued especially in times of grief. Care in behaviour and thinking patterns is taken to avoid confrontations during difficulty times. The community members are bound together by common goals of rescuing the victims of natural disasters.

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