

Multi-faceted Spirituality after Traumatic Loss: A Thematic Study

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1. Introduction

1.1 Spirituality & Traumatic Loss

Research strongly suggests a steady relationship between important life circumstances and one's tendency towards spiritual transcendence (Young et al. 2000). Three patterns along which spirituality is found acting and somehow defined are: 1) as a coping mechanism against negative life events (Ellison, 1991); 2) as providing social support (Galea, 2008); and 3) as a meaning-making mechanism (Piedmont, 2001). Spirituality can serve both as predictor and an outcome variable (Galea et al., 2007). Just as grief is varied and complex for different people, the same applies to the response to it. Research indicates that for some, positive religious coping (PRC)—underlined as a secure bond to God, is helpful; while for others, a negative religious coping (NRC), defined as spiritual and interpersonal religious discontent (Pargament, 2001) may also play out. At times, these diverse coping mechanisms are even seen together, in answer to grief. Both PRC and NRC are subsets of coping responses.

1.2 Malta & Fireworks

Malta is a densely populated island in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea. Humans have inhabited Malta since 5200 BC. The island is *littered* by megalithic temples, some of which predate Giza Pyramids. Malta was later ruled by the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, and Arabs. Malta and its islands, gained independence from the British in 1964, became republic in 1973, and joined the EU in 2004. Malta has a population of almost 600K, with some 40K living on the island of Gozo.

Malta is mainly Catholic. Every summer, each town celebrates the feast of the respective saint. Each feast includes many socio-religious activities, together with a large display of fireworks, seen as a requisite. Pyrotechnics are manufactured locally, mostly on voluntary basis and with a licence. However, a spate of tragic explosions in the last 40 years left many victims.

This study investigated the experiences of some relatives who lost their loved ones in such tragic events in the island of Gozo.

2. Method & Objectives

2.1 Objectives

This research focused on vicarious trauma experiences by relatives due to religious fireworks tragedies in Malta, how spirituality was impacted, and how that influenced the lives of relatives.

2.2 Participants & Procedures

Eight participants were selected through purposive sampling, (age range: 18 - 68 yo, M= 43.63). All were females, except one. All subjects hailed from the island of Gozo.

Inclusion criteria of the study were individuals related to victims of fireworks tragedies, age 18 plus, who were willing to participate freely, and who experienced their trauma at least 2 years prior the study and not earlier than 14 years. Data was collected through deep, semi-structured and face to face interviews. Interviews ranged from about 65 - 90 minutes, with 3 requesting extra sessions. All interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms were given to protect subjects' identity.

Participants included four parents who lost their children, one lost her father, another who lost a son and a spouse during the same accident, one who lost a sibling and one who lost a relative, all due to firework accidents. Among the victims, four worked full-time in pyrotechnics, and four as their hobby. Only two of the victims died alone, while the rest died with other colleagues at the scene. Participants ranged from two students, four housewives, a self-employed and a civil servant.

2.3 Data Analysis

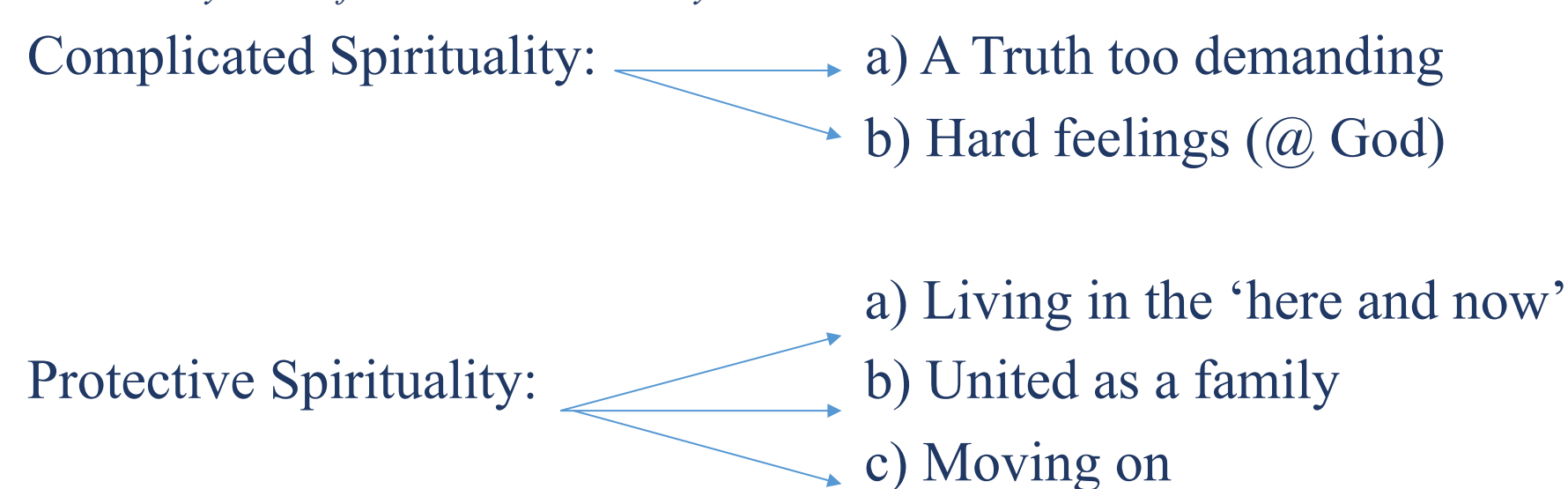
Thematic Analysis was the approach chosen for this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as the process of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within a set given of data. It is a flexible analytic method that allows for meaningful and rich description of data. A process of coding in six phases is done to create established and meaningful patterns. These phases are 1) the familiarization with the data collected (transcribing data and noting initial ideas), 2) generation of initial codes (coding interesting features of data), 3) searching for themes among codes (collating codes into potential themes), 4) reviewing themes (gathering a thematic “map” of analysis), 5) defining and naming themes (refining specifics of each theme), and 6) production of final report.

2.4 Ethics

Informed written consent was obtained from all participants, who were ensured of confidentiality of their identity and experiences. The study had all ethical clearance from the University of Malta ethical board.

3. Results & Discussion

Table 1. Key results from the Thematic Analysis



Two themes emerged from these results: a) complicated spirituality, and b) protective spirituality.

3.1 Complicated Spirituality

Two codes resulted. Trauma is quite daunting, thus benefit is quite tricky to beget.

3.1.1. A Truth too Demanding: The first obvious result was that trauma was a truth too demanding, where some resort for answers from their faith: ‘why did God let this happen? Why does God remains silent in face of such loss?’

3.1.2. Hard Feelings That Ensur: Coping with such difficult and sudden loss, engulfed participants with many troubling emotions, including: a) Anger at God: for letting tragedy occur; b) Frustration at God, as such trauma was not the only one experienced; and c) Pain: at how events unfolded, and what had occurred since then, including shattered dreams.

3.2 Protective Spirituality

Three codes resulted, focusing on spirituality as a positive strength.

3.2.1. Living in the “Here and Now” – which entails accepting oneself and others together with their behavior, even when it is challenging. This helped pave the way to focus entirely on the ‘present’.

3.2.2. United as a Family: Spirituality was found as leading to cohesion among affected families, particularly in the aftermath of trauma. Unison was always viewed as strength for a better life.

3.2.3. Moving on: despite the daily challenges, spirituality empowered participants to move on and be creative, rather than dwell on self-pity and depression.

3.3 Discussion

Complicated spirituality brought forth a harder reality. In this study, complicated spirituality explained life as: a) too taxing, and b) further exacerbated by the emotional turmoil that ensued from it.

On the other hand, protective spirituality was the second emergent theme. Spirituality was beneficial in helping relatives embrace the here and now, to seek unison despite trauma and to keep moving on.

Spiritual inner life was described as the only location of freedom or escape from unbearable physical and emotional pain (Frankl, 1962). In synthesizing related research, while spirituality and religion can be related to guilt, neurotic and psychotic disorders, they also can be powerful sources of hope, meaning, peace, comfort and forgiveness for the self and others (Brewer-Smyth, K. and Koenig, H.G. (2014). In fact, spiritual beliefs were found to be having a significant effect during times of struggles and trials in people's lives—an aspect that relates to protective spirituality as is being suggested in this study.

Research continues to show the link between spirituality and posttraumatic growth. The value of spirituality in becoming protective to individuals facing trauma seems to lie in producing a meaningful perspective through which painful experiences may be more easily borne (Galea et al., 2008).

3.4 Strengths & Limitations

This study is the first of its kind in Malta because it evaluates in depth the experiences of relatives who tragically lost a loved one, a trauma borne within a religious context. On the other hand, a number of limitations are also in place: first, being a small study, it restricts its reach. Second, the nature of the purposive sampling, which was important considering that the available participant pool was limited. Finally, gender bias, which is understandable because males are mostly involved in pyrotechnics.

3.5 Recommendations & Conclusion

This study suggests further research is warranted into the experiences of those stricken with trauma, especially within a religious context. It also presents a number of demands and cautions to religious bodies for whose cause, risky behaviour may occur by their adherents in view of religious-cultural activities. More stringent regulations are therefore called for.

This study highlighted two key results that were noted from the thematic analysis employed: conflicting and complicated spirituality, highlighted by strong emotions and difficulty integrating the hard truth that ensues from such trauma, and protective spirituality, resulting from family cohesion, ability to move on with life, and living in the present. The relevance and implications of these results were discussed.

4. References

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