Half-Way from Home: An Autoethnography of Being a Locally Stranded Student during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT. Quarantine measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 resulted in millions of Filipinos getting stranded. Using autoethnography, this paper is a layered account of my experience as a locally stranded individual, particularly how I coped and used certain privileges to get out from such a dreadful experience. I conveyed my story by also incorporating different voices through related literature and interviews of other stranded students. My journey begins with downplaying the pandemic's severity to coming to terms with my vulnerability at that time. Being stranded is akin to being stuck in limbo, overcoming the obstacles and challenges to get home, and realizing the importance of privilege in times of hardship. The coping strategies used while stranded reflect the distinct Filipino ways of coping, such as *bayanihan*, *pag-tiis*, and *utang na loob*. Writing this autoethnography has proven therapeutic and allowed me to see my experience in a wider context.

1.0. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a momentary halt to travel as various governments implemented quarantine measures to contain the highly infectious disease (Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020). The Philippines began with a lockdown of the capital, Metro Manila, beginning March 15, 2020. Community quarantine was implemented for the rest of the region, and a memorandum from the IATF allowed other areas in the country to implement the same restrictions (Talabong, 2020; CNN Philippines, 2020b). The Philippines response to COVID-19 had numerous gaps in implementation. To begin with, the country was already ill-equipped due to the uneven distribution of resources and capacity between urban and rural areas in the health sector. As the number of cases ramped up, facilities became overwhelmed, namely the hospitals, barangay health units, and laboratories that could conduct RT-PCR tests. Poor contact tracing and low testing capacity made detecting and containing the virus difficult. Misinformation about the virus also spread like wildfire through social media despite government efforts on risk communication (Amit et. al., 2021).

The country's "lockdown" is also one of the longest and strictest, often referred to as "draconian" and "militarized." Largely influenced by the fact that the Inter-Agency Task Force was composed of retired generals and soldiers, without a single epidemiologist or health professional among them. The pandemic response was framed as a war against an invisible enemy, which gave officials enough reason to enact harsh penalties on violators who were painted as "*pasaway*" (Hapal, 2021). Interestingly, such harsh punishments were often targeted toward the urban poor as numerous officials remain unpunished when revealed to have broken protocols (Albert, 2020).

Results from a mobile phone survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) conducted between May 4 to 10, 2020, showed that there were approximately 4.1 million stranded individuals throughout the country (SWS, 2020). A separate survey by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) revealed that over 9,000 students were stranded in their dormitories, and over a thousand more were stranded abroad (Merez, 2020). However, it is important to note that there is no official count on how many Filipinos were stranded. The IATF released a memorandum on May 13, 2020, introducing the term "locally stranded individual" (LSI) to the pandemic lexicon. LSI refers to stranded Filipinos or foreign nationals "who have expressed intention to return to their place of residence or home origin." Local

workers, students, tourists, and people stranded in transit fall under this definition.

The *Balik Probinsya Bagong Pag-asa* Program (BP2) and *Hatid Probinsya* program were meant to address the situation. BP2 is a long-term program for residents of Metro Manila who want to relocate back to the provinces. On the other hand, the *Hatid Probinsya* program is meant to bring LSIs to their destinations. Unfortunately, both programs were hastily planned and less successful in their implementation (Salamanca, 2020; The Manila Times, 2020). Since then, the BP2 program has been put to a halt, and *Hatid Probinsya* blamed by receiving LGUs for importing COVID-19 cases.

The journey of LSIs is described to be an "emotional rollercoaster." From initially dismissing the gravity of their situation to a growing sense of alarm that culminated in shock when classes became suspended. These periods were specially marked by feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and frustration (Cahapay, 2020; Guzman et al., 2020). Being stranded exposed LSIs to vulnerable situations that compromised their well-being, placing them at higher risk for psychological distress. Lack of immediate social support, limited financial resources, and social exclusion led to LSIs becoming susceptible to COVID infection (Choudhari, 2020; Cristobal & Bance, 2021; Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility [CMFR], 2020). Countless stories of the struggles experienced by LSIs were featured in news reports and on various social media platforms. Such is the story of Michelle Silvertino, a mother who died to make it home to her children. Her death subsequently led to widespread anger online, with people calling for justice and criticizing the government's handling of the LSIs (Regan, 2020).

Given the difficulty of their current situation, LSIs cope by constantly making a conscious effort in their cognition and behavior to manage the various stressors they face (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, cited in Kuo, 2014). These coping strategies are linked to Filipino concepts of resilience, *bayanihan*, religion, and familial support (Sison, 2014; Su & Mangada, 2016; Straiton et al., 2017). Disasters and crisis events have become a constant in the lives of Filipinos. *Bayanihan*, humor and optimism, *pag-tiis*, and the *"bahala na"* expression have become associated with the widely acknowledged "Filipino way" of coping (Bankoff, 2007; Rilveria, 2018; Su & Mangada, 2016; Lagman et al., 2014; Connor, 2016).

A frequent narrative in every aftermath is the resilience of the Filipino people. This brand of Filipino resilience comprises the various forms of coping exhibited during disasters and crises (Sison, 2014). To be resilient means that an individual can adapt to difficult situations. This involves employing various strategies (e.g., problem and emotion-focused coping) to act as a buffer against distressing situations. Developing positive coping strategies can lead to a healthier approach to stress and result in better well-being (Cordova & Sia, 2019; Valladolid, 2021).

The concepts of "stranded-ness," disasters, and crises are not foreign to Filipinos. However, the pandemic has had socioeconomic, political, and cultural impacts resulting in sudden and immense changes to daily life. The phenomenon of locally stranded individuals is an issue brought about by COVID-19, but its underlying causes have existed before the virus' spread. Conducting research through self-reflection and personal narratives is a rich source of data that can explain specific experiences in a pandemic context. Through writing, a shift in perspective allows an author to confront personal thoughts and expectations, even if it may reveal uncomfortable truths. It has also opened discussions surrounding the precarious situations in which vulnerable populations may find themselves, invoking a sense of solidarity to address them (Herrmann & Adams, 2020; Roy & Uekusa, 2020; Pruulman-Vengerfeldt, 2021; Nunn et al., 2021).

This study intends to shed light on the realities of being stranded amid a pandemic through the lens of a Filipino student. Through reflection and citing the sociocultural context in which this personal experience took place, this paper seeks to highlight the government's complications in assisting the LSI. Providing such insight may open discussions for further research and improvement in responding to the displacement of people during disasters and crises.

2.0. Methodology

This study is an autoethnography rooted in my own experience as an LSI. Through writing this paper with my own "voice" as a stranded student, I seek to "invite others to develop new understandings, awareness, and...empathy" (Leavy, 2007 cited Phan, 2022, p. 3). Writing this account has also allowed me to make sense of the time I spent stranded, as autoethnography also serves a therapeutic function (Ellis et al., 2011).

Autoethnography deviates from traditional methods of inquiry by taking personal experience

and connecting it to the social and cultural context (Adams et al., 2017). Researchers "retrospectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or possessing a particular cultural identity" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 4). This method is more than just retelling a story; it involves reflexive and systematic analyses of experiences. To properly convey the emotions in experiences told through autoethnography, writing involves borrowing techniques from autobiography and ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011; Adams et al., 2017).

I write about my experience through a layered account that incorporates different voices – in the form of related literature and data collected from interviews – to convey my story (Ellis et al., 2011; Rambo, 2005). The decision to include open-ended interviews with 11 other stranded students was intended to serve as a frame of reference as I reflected on my own experience as an LSI. Aside from documenting the realities of being an LSI and providing an "insider perspective," there is also a commitment to provide insight into the social phenomena (Livesey & Runsen, 2018) – in this case, stranded individuals in the context of a pandemic.

Before conducting interviews, I wrote a first-person account of my journey as an LSI. To verify my recollected events, I reviewed relevant sources, such as past e-mails, private messages, photographs, news articles, and memorandums. Preliminary questions for the interviews were referenced from my written account, and follow-up questions were asked accordingly.

Referral sampling was used to identify other stranded students based on the criteria that they were stranded for a minimum of two weeks in an area that was not their place of habitual residence and processed the appropriate documents to travel back home. Male and female students were sought out until data saturation was achieved. Due to quarantine measures, all interviews were held online via a video conference call (i.e., Google Meet), e-mail correspondence, and instant messaging applications. As I talked to other students, I transcribed, coded, and generated themes. I was also reflecting on my own experience. The stories validated and/or countered my experiences and aided in the "reflexivity" of my analysis.

Taking from personal experiences involves certain ethical considerations. In conducting autoethnographic research, as the author writes about themselves, they also write about the people (the "characters") involved in their narrative. Autoethnographers are often faced with the dilemma of relational ethics. There is no distinct method to ascertain which process is ethical, rather, "...we constantly have to consider which questions to ask, which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling." (Ellis, 2007, p. 25). Throughout the implementation and writing of this study, careful consideration has been taken to protect the privacy of all "characters" mentioned in my narrative. No identifying information was mentioned, except for those deemed relevant and necessary to frame the context of the study. Such information is my university's name and personal travel history, and all persons included in my narrative are referred to with an alias.

3.0. Results

The calm before the storm

I was the typical college student pursuing her undergraduate degree at Silliman University, located in a city miles away from my hometown of Davao. With no relatives living in the area then, I lived off-campus in a studio apartment with a roommate. My tumultuous journey began on March 13, 2020, when the university released an advisory that canceled all classes and final examinations for the semester. Typically, finals week for college students meant that we would be in a rush to submit requirements and pass exams. After my university cancelled everything and urged students to take the opportunity to travel home, I was among those who felt no sense of urgency.

I did reschedule my flight to an earlier date, on the 15th of March instead of the 23rd. At that point, any other flight schedules was unavailable or sold out. I also opted out in taking alternative routes such as a bus trip or the ferry because I firmly believed I would be home in a few days. The day before my flight, I was busy packing my belongings with my roommate, Abby. She meant to return to Bacolod that morning but postponed her trip to the 15th instead.

It was at exactly 6:59 PM when I received a message from a friend containing the screenshot of Executive Order No. 5-E, wherein the Governor of Cebu ordered the immediate ban on the entry of air travel passengers coming from Clark International Airport, Legazpi City, Cagayan de Oro City, and Dumaguete City. At the time, these were the areas that had reported cases of COVID infection. Very soon after, the airline notified me of my flight's cancellation. I had a full-blown mental breakdown.

My roommate and her family suggested that I come to Bacolod. A direct flight to Davao was available, and the city had not closed its borders yet – it was a chance to get home. My parents and I took the risk and booked a flight for the 17th. In the meantime, it was arranged that we would take the first bus trip to Bacolod and that I stay for two nights with Abby's family. When I arrived in Bacolod on the morning of March 15, I soon received a notification that my flight had been canceled. It was immediately decided that I would take a 2GO ferry to Cagayan de Oro and ride a bus bound for Davao. The following day, I woke up to the radio and my roommate holding a screenshot of Bacolod City's release of Executive Order No. 20-15 that same morning. It imposed a closure on all points of entry in Bacolod. All inbound and outbound trips were canceled.

My fate was sealed: I was stuck. I found myself stranded in an unfamiliar city, with no relatives and not knowing a single word of Hiligaynon. All that I brought with me were the bare necessities: my gadgets, unfinished schoolwork, a handful of clothes, and some pocket money. My parents deemed it futile to attempt another trip, deciding to wait out the quarantine period instead. Until then, I was to continue living with Abby's family.

This turn of events felt overwhelming and sudden. Indeed, the decision by universities and colleges to cancel all activities and send their students home was a valid response to the worsening COVID-19 situation. However, it also failed to account for the students who cannot easily pack their things and go (Redden, 2020). I was preoccupied with meeting my academic requirements, and by the time my university released a memorandum, several trips became unavailable or fully booked. Any alternative routes I could have taken were limited by cities closing their borders. Furthermore, after several semesters of traveling back and forth for my education, I had a false sense of security. Travelling was routine and expected – I never once believed I was at risk of being stranded. When living away from family, much of our well-being rests on the assurance that we can easily hop on a plane in emergencies (Gates et al., 2020).

Despite the rising cases and travel restrictions being implemented in other countries, I remained under the impression that the situation was in control. Aside from temperature checks and alcohol dispensers in public spaces, everyone else went about their business as usual. The growing alarm and hysteria, which led to the hoarding of personal protective equipment (PPE), were downplayed by then-president Duterte. Compared to other countries, the Philippines was also sluggish in enacting emergency measures – only implementing a travel ban the day after DOH announced the country's first confirmed case (Department of Health, 2020; Beltran, 2020).

In the state of limbo

Following the decision to remain in Bacolod City, for the time being, I spent three months living with my roommate's family, from March 15 to June 15, 2020. In the first two weeks of the community quarantine, I had this assumption that things would soon return to normal. My sense of hope quickly dwindled as the lockdown kept extending every two weeks.

The refuge and shelter I once associated with the places I considered "home" soon devolved into a place of confinement. Stay-at-home orders perpetuated this feeling of being "stuck" in the confines of our own space and minds (Herrmann, 2021). Since I always considered myself to be a homebody that preferred the indoors, I expected to be able to adjust to my unconventional living situation easily. I was wrong. Each day felt frustratingly slow, almost stagnant. My daily routine before the pandemic usually went along the lines of "wake up, walk to school, attend class, walk back home, and occasionally go out to meet my friends." While stranded, my routine became more akin to "walking to the dining table, sitting in the living room, moving to the veranda, then back to bed to sleep." Rinse and repeat.

Boredom and "stuckness" were feelings that became all-too-familiar throughout quarantine. So much so that I began spending more time wallowing in regret, frustration, and sadness. Being an LSI amid a global pandemic is like being in limbo. I was constantly on edge, obsessing over every news update on travel restrictions and feeling immense guilt for being a burden. In my anxiety-ridden mind, I was a freeloader mooching off my roommate's family and a daughter who wasted her parent's money with all the canceled trips, adding to their multitude of problems. This kind of feeling is shared by Maria:

> "Siyempre, dili man siguro basta-basta mag-ingon na "Can I stay here?" Ana gud. (Of course, it is not that easy to just ask, "Can I stay here?" like that.) And her apartment was really not that [spacious] – it can cater for two people, but still. And I have known her for so long,

but then there is still the feeling of...kabalo ka sa feeling sa mangalahig? Murag mahadlok ko mangalahig (Do you know what it feels like to cause inconvenience? It is like that, I am afraid to cause inconvenience).” (“Maria”, Personal Communication, September 25, 2021).

While I was fortunate enough not to have spent this time stranded alone, these negative emotions were not unique to me. The pandemic has caused stranded students' lives to dramatically change in a matter of days. Feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation stemmed from the fact that traveling home was not possible and family was miles away. Furthermore, with education put to a halt, any plans for our future have been derailed. The social network and community we have built while in university have also been cut off, intensifying feelings of isolation (Bello et al., 2021; Zakaria et al., 2021). I relied on social media to maintain contact with friends and family to maintain some semblance of human interaction. It helped, too, that I was living with other people, easing my loneliness.

“Pandemic-productivity”

Not knowing what to do with my emotions, I often lashed out at my family members when they checked on me. So, I tried to find creative ways to distract myself from such thoughts. I installed online games to play, looked up new movies and series to watch, and I also began picking up hobbies that were time-consuming and engaging, like reading, crocheting, and exercising. I made a point to have at least one activity to busy myself with every day. During our interview, Pam shared the same sentiment:

> “I tried to make a routine during the start of the pandemic wherein I'd start my day by taking a bath early and wearing clothing I usually wear in school in order to be productive. But it was only at the start. After, I'd wake up a little late in the morning then do what I needed to do. But it was really hard to focus and be productive.” (“Pam”, Personal communication, September 22, 2021).

There was this recurrent need to be “productive.” During lockdowns, the way we experience time has changed, as if almost suspended. Flitting back and forth between feeling too slow and fast all at once. Attempts at productivity, though with good intentions, were my way of regaining control amid the chaos (Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2021). I mistakenly thought, now that I spent so much time indoors, the next obvious step was to “work on myself” for self-improvement. This meant learning a new skill, picking a new hobby, or building new habits. I was eager to spend each day as “productively” as possible – the results varied, some hobbies stuck, and other habits abandoned. It did not help that this “productive” ethos was rampant all-over social media. The insistence on “pandemic productivity” ignores the grim reality of our situation (North, 2021; Lorenz, 2020). It was unrealistic for me to assume that I could carry on the same way I did before the pandemic when I was emotionally distressed and had not even processed my experience.

On flowcharts and procedures: Processing the LSI

Prior to discussing the string of events that eventually led to the continuation of my journey home, I will first discuss what it took to be able to travel home as an LSI. The protocols outlined in this paper were in effect between May to December 2020 based on the context of my personal experience and that of the other stranded students I interviewed.

On May 13, 2020, the National Task Force (NTF) Against COVID-19 released Memorandum No. 2020-02 that introduced the term “locally stranded individuals” along with operational guidelines intended to provide a coordinated response in facilitating the transport of LSIs. The memorandum was the light at the end of the dark, dark tunnel I felt that I was trapped in. It was at this point in my journey that I began the painstaking process of trying to go home.

Through the memorandum, the Sub-Task Group on Management (STG) of Returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs) and Locally Stranded Individuals (LSIs) was organized. Its objective was to process, facilitate, and aid ROFs and LSIs. Alongside it was the coordination of various agencies at the national, regional, and local levels.

Each agency had a responsibility to ensure a streamlined process. The Department of Tourism (DoT) and Department of Transportation (DoTr) provided air, sea, and land transport services. DoT handled the charter and sweeper flights, while DoTr had to ensure that services were available to

ensure travel was immediate and well ordered. The Philippine National Police (PNP), through the Joint Task Force COVID Shield (JTF COVID Shield), would have to secure the checkpoints. Lastly, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) would have to coordinate with the other agencies and provide logistical needs for all operations.

The respective local government units (LGUs) were tasked to provide services to transfer LSIs from the ports, airports, and terminals within their jurisdiction to their respective residences. This order meant that the coordination between one LGU to another was crucial. It was left to the discretion of each LGU whether they would implement mandatory quarantine (in a facility or at home) for all arriving ROFs and LSIs. So long as the individual had the complete requirements, none of the LGUs could deny their entry.

The long journey home

Some form of travel had resumed following the release of the memorandum. Although, it was only limited to sweeper flights, land, or sea trips organized by different LGUs. Commercial travel routes remained limited. Still, that did not deter me from trying to go home. I filled out every form and survey from various agencies and LGUs offering to assist LSIs. The glaring problem with my situation became apparent: the logistics were not in my favor. I made several calls to both Bacolod and Davao City's DoT but was informed that no sweeper flights were arranged between the two cities. Organizing one was unlikely as there were not enough Davao residents in Bacolod for a plane. It was at this point in my journey that the precarity of my situation reached an all-time high. I constantly felt let down and ignored by the agencies and offices that I believed were meant to help me.

The month of May came and went. By June, domestic travel had resumed, and so did commercial flights (CNN Philippines, 2020a). I booked a flight bound for Davao and a ferry to Cagayan de Oro, but both trips were canceled. Despite DoTr announcing that flights were indeed resuming, there was a disconnect between the IATF and LGUs, as local governments were allowed to keep their airports closed and reject incoming flights (CMFR, 2020).

I almost gave up when the impossible happened: there was a sweeper flight bound for Davao that I was eligible for. The flight would make a stop in Iloilo, which meant that I would have to travel to another city to board it. Furthermore, since the sweeper flight was not arranged by my LGU, I had to appeal to the organizers to be allowed as a passenger. Fearful that I would "jinx" this chance, I told no one about the flight. When I finally received the email approving my request, it felt unreal.

It was arranged that I would hitch a ride from Bacolod to Iloilo with some colleagues of Abby's mother. To avoid delays and the risk of missing the flight, I traveled to Iloilo a day ahead – on June 15, 2020. So I packed my belongings and bid goodbye to Abby's family. From there, I was picked up by my father's colleague in Iloilo to stay with them for one more night before my flight.

I finally got on the plane bound for Davao City on the morning of June 16, 2020. Despite being constantly worried that something would go wrong, it was a smooth flight. After filling out paperwork for contact tracing and going through the health screening, I was finally out of the airport, in my father's car, on my way home. The next day, I reported myself as an LSI to my barangay and underwent a 14-day home quarantine. Although I arrived on June 16th, I usually consider July 2 – the end of home quarantine – the day I was truly home.

Hiccups in the system

On paper, it seemed to be streamlined – but in its implementation, all those involved dealt with their fair share of problems. If anything, my travel experience is an outlier compared to what other LSIs underwent.

To elaborate on the process: first, the LSI must notify the barangay from their LGU of origin of their status as an LSI. The next step was to secure a medical certificate from the City Health Office or Barangay Health Center that confirmed the completion of the 14-day quarantine and that they had not been in contact with a suspect, probable, or confirmed COVID-19 case. If the LSI was a close contact or was positive for COVID, they had to test negative twice through RT-PCR. Once secured, the LSI can process their travel authority. This was to be done by the barangay and issued by the JTF COVID Shield. A list of LSIs, their point of origin, destination, travel dates, names of drivers, vehicles, or manner of travel used would be submitted. The barangay would then notify the LSI when their documents were ready.

The minimum requirements for travel are the medical certificate and travel authority, but LGUs

often require additional requirements. These typically comprised an acceptance letter and negative RT-PCR or Antigen test results. Contacting the receiving LGU beforehand was important as lacking any requirements could hamper their travel. Upon arrival at any port of entry, the receiving LGU would be responsible for handling the LSIs.

Due to the entire process involving so many moving parts, it led to a lot of confusion. On the LSIs part, they had to coordinate with multiple agencies – the barangay, the City Health Office, their destination's barangay, and the PNP, to name a few. Each document needed for travel entailed lengthy wait times and financial resources. There was also a lack of coordination at the barangay level. Sudden changes in requirements by the receiving LGU led to LSIs struggling to meet them on short notice. Information dissemination was lacking, and hotlines were often busy or unavailable. Time added pressure since all travel documents were only valid for a brief window. It was important to travel on the day indicated by the travel authority. Any requirements going past the allowed validity entailed repeating the entire process from the very beginning. It also meant more expenses since COVID tests and fares were usually shouldered by the LSI. Rosalyn expressed frustration with the process, which left her feeling helpless and confused:

> "…It was very messy because you did not know where to go. I had to ask around people who actually went home. And then sometimes they are like, "Oh, you should check because maybe they changed it"

> But the thing is, during the time I was about to go home…or like weeks before I went home…I tried to search about it. But it was so difficult because there was no notice, not from the government agencies like websites telling you how to go home properly.

> 'Cause iba-iba ang procedure nila paminsan na mabigay and you're not sure which one to choose. ('Cause they give you different procedures sometimes, and you are not sure which one to choose.) So, you go to their office and then there are a lot of people there. Paminsan, they also change their minds every now and then, so now you are left to wonder, like "what am I supposed to do?" ("Rosalyn", Personal Communication, September 12, 2021).

As the government ramped up the implementation of its *Hatid Tulong* initiative, arrivals became more frequent, which overwhelmed receiving LGUs. Furthermore, the conditions LSIs found themselves in while waiting in the transit areas were far from ideal. These were often cramped and breached social distancing protocols. Such living conditions may have caused the numerous reports of LSIs testing positive for COVID upon arrival (Madarang, 2020). Repatriation flights had to be halted in some LGUs as their quarantine facilities reached a critical level (Marzan, 2020; Sornito, 2020). In a position paper by the League of Provinces in the Philippines (2020), they requested several changes to the existing policy. Such as clarifying the definition of who can be considered an LSI and a 2-week moratorium each month before another batch of arrivals. This would allow each LGU enough time to prepare their facilities, give frontliners and other personnel a brief resting period, and ensure contact tracing.

All the helping hands

Although my journey has ended, the time I was an LSI continues to affect my present self. Occasionally, the story of how I got stranded for months in the middle of a pandemic comes up in conversation. In these conversations, I often receive a remark about how "lucky I am." That I was "lucky" to be housed by my roommate's family, or how "lucky" I was to be included in the sweeper flight and not have to pay for it. Maybe that was it – there was this omnipresent force that led to these events happening at the right place and time. However, it outright ignores the fact that I benefited from the social connections afforded to me by my privilege.

What I have learned from the time I was an LSI is that no one is safe from experiencing hardships in life. Yet, some people manage to have it easier than others. My economic standing, employment, education, and the like, gave me an advantage. I am fortunate to have many "helping hands." I was able to live in a household, free of charge, with all my needs taken care of. I was in a safe environment, finances were not a problem, and the threat of a COVID infection was minimal as I remained indoors all day. Even in acquiring my travel documents – having people privy to the inner workings of the offices and agencies helped expedite the process.

I felt an immense sense of gratitude and indebtedness to the people who helped me. Although

the word "debt" is associated with "*utang na loob*," it does not feel like a burden. Rather, it is an opportunity to pay the act of kindness forward and build interpersonal relationships (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Closely associated with "*utang na loob*" is the concept of reciprocity between the beneficiary and the benefactor. Being the person on the receiving end, the help received goes beyond what is expected from the benefactor. This "excess" becomes the basis of wanting to repay them, whether through monetary, material, or intangible manners, even if the benefactor does not demand anything in return (Rungduin et al., 2016).

In the words of Herbig (2021), I am fortunate to "...exist within a system designed to help me continue." I had taken for granted how large a role privilege played in my life. In experiencing the consequences of COVID-19, while we are all "equally" susceptible to infection, there are other socioeconomic factors that must be considered.

Educational attainment and economic standing directly affect compliance with health protocols (e.g., social distancing and quarantine). Low-income populations who do not have access to adequate healthcare are met with the dilemma of breaching protocols to work, risking their health and safety or staying at home and not having the means to support themselves (Estrela et al., 2020). Furthermore, implementing lockdowns that heavily restrict mobility aggravates the inequality of living conditions across different socioeconomic brackets. Particularly in urban areas, those living in poverty do not have the luxury of "space." Hence, the desire for mobility to find respite from constricting spaces (Dobusch & Kreissl, 2020).

In the Philippines, it is Filipinos belonging to the urban poor who bore the brunt of the government's draconian measures. Numerous reports and sightings have pointed out how law enforcement is prejudiced in arresting and punishing the "*pasaway*" – often those living in poverty (Beltran, 2020). A militaristic pandemic response has proven to be ineffective. The Philippines had numerous gaps in all its implemented programs – from vaccine rollout, the severity of lockdowns, case counts, infection, and death rates (Atienza & Villegas, 2021).

4.0. Discussion

The events narrated in this account are consistent with the related literature surrounding LSIs. The emotional turmoil and sudden turn of events are reminiscent of Cahapay's (2020) theme of an "emotional rollercoaster." Being stranded has led to a lot of psychological distress, further aggravated by the vulnerable position that stranded students may find themselves in, as with the results of Guzman et al. (2020) and Choudhari's (2020) studies.

Interestingly, being an LSI places an individual in a liminal space. Following Gennep's (1960 cited in Beech, 2011) concept of liminality, LSI finds itself stuck in between the "before" and "after" states of travel and emerges from the experience as a different person. While in this liminal space, it felt like it did not matter what my "identity" was before (e.g., a humanities student, being a *Davaoeño*) as I began to identify myself as someone who was stranded. Implying how "stuck" I was feeling in the situation, leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation.

During this period, it can be noted that the coping mechanisms employed in response to being stranded were in accordance with the distinct Filipino ways of coping. The people who went out of their way to help me when I was stranded reflect the *bayanihan* spirit of helping others and assuming their burdens (Bankoff, 2007; Su & Mangada, 2016). As the quarantine period dragged on, my perspective began to change from being "myself" to seeing a "community" of people who were also affected by the pandemic. This nurtured an environment where people offered a helping hand (Zheng, 2021). I found myself being the beneficiary of numerous acts of goodwill. In return, I felt indebted ("*utang na loob*") to them. Having "*utang na loob*" in this situation is heavily rooted in feelings of gratitude and intentions of maintaining the social connection well into the future. Going through months filled with uncertainty on whether we can go home involves *pag-tiis* or persevering through a time of hardship.

Bringing up notions of "perseverance" essentially begs the question of whether I remained resilient amidst my circumstances, as resilience can be either a trait or an outcome (Cordova & Sia, 2019). If I was asked the question, my immediate answer would have been a definite "no." In my narrative, resilience was an outcome that emerged over time, after months of being away from family, learning, and coping with uncertain circumstances. Much like the written accounts in the paper by Nunn et al. (2021), my story also shares the themes of finding "light" amid "darkness" by likening the memorandum as the "light that signified the end of a dark tunnel." Writing this

autoethnography has revealed my desire to find meaning in my journey. If in "darkness" there is "light," and if my overcoming of the challenges as an LSI was any indication, in precarity, we are predisposed to find hope.

5.0. Conclusion

Becoming stranded can feel like an isolating experience. In writing an autoethnography of my experience as a locally stranded individual, I sought to raise the voices of college students affected by travel restrictions. The journey begins with the sudden cancellation of our classes. A dismissive attitude toward the pandemic and limited options to travel home led to getting stranded. Strict stay-at-home orders turned the refuge of home into confinement. At the same time, there was this pressure to remain "productive" amid a stressful time. A sense of hope came from a memorandum outlining procedures for LSI to travel home. Unfortunately, this process came with its own set of problems resulting from multiple requirements with each only valid for a limited time, a lack of coordination between involved offices and agencies, and a militaristic pandemic response. Emergent themes in my narrative are finding hope amid uncertainty, the significance of privilege in adapting to difficulties in life, and the Filipino way of coping. Seen in the resilience to overcome our situation, the *bayanihan* spirit found in the countless people offering help and *utang na loob* I felt towards them afterward.

While concepts of strandedness, disasters, and crises are familiar to Filipinos, the pandemic has highlighted existing inequality and exacerbated the issue. The government's failure to address the inadequate healthcare system is also reflected in local governments being unprepared for the pandemic. Most disaster preparedness plans are geared towards natural disasters, namely typhoons. Before the pandemic, the term "locally stranded individuals" had not even existed, nor was there an agency or office existing or assigned to assist them. Aside from this, the IATF's implemented protocols required excessive travel documents for the LSI, yet failed to implement their protocol uniformly. The uncoordinated implementation of *Hatid Probinsya* also failed to account for proper communication with the receiving LGU and facilities to house LSIs waiting for their trip home.

However, as with other autoethnographic research, this perspective is but one out of many others. Although intricate, it is also partial (Herrmann, 2021). Further research is recommended as the results of this study are not conclusive. Given the wide scope of the LSI definition, being stranded is not an experience limited to students alone. For example, tourists and migrant workers would likely undergo specific situations unique to their circumstances. A study from the perspective of the employees and volunteers involved in processing the LSI may also provide insight that stranded individuals are unaware of. It is also important to note that the pandemic is still ongoing and ever-changing. The reflections and arguments made in this paper are like a time capsule – reflecting my perspective on this significant life event during a certain point in their life. The long-term effects of being stranded are not explored in this paper.

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