

COVID-19 study of Zulu people's coping and resilience in the pandemic

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Indigenous knowledge systems across planet earth have traditionally honoured life as a deeply interconnected whole. Similar to other African communities, Zulu people have long recognized that survival depends on harmonious social and ecological relationships. To prevent disorder and chaos, people are expected to work at maintaining harmony, especially through ancestral consciousness and socially coherent relationships as epitomized in the internationally recognized concept of Ubuntu, which ultimately implies that meaning in life is only possible through human relationships. South Africa is presently in lockdown with regulated social distancing, frequent hand washing and or sanitization as well as wearing of masks. The research question therefore arose as to how traditional Zulu people would experience coping with COVID-19 if denied normal social relationships, which constitute an existential pillar of existence and customary way of life? This exploratory study, was conducted at the University of Zululand and in adjacent rural areas populated by traditional Zulu people. A survey type questionnaire technique was motivated by the consideration that the consciousness raised by persons' considering their coping experiences would be intrinsically therapeutic. Raw data was subjected to three levels of analysis. Firstly, NVivo and MAXQDA analyses provided a course sieve for further thematic analysis. Secondly eleven emerging themes were independently elicited by two researchers. Thirdly final themes were consensually validated, integrated and relevant examples chosen for this report. Respective, rank-ordered, overlapping coping themes involved people, action, culture, time, home, technology, COVID-19, life, family, rules and world. Participants generally indicated resilient, adaptive, coping responses. The COVID-19 pandemic was recognized for its danger and treated appropriately, especially through human, communal, cultural, ecological and spiritual relationships. In addition, participants actively used contemporary resources, communicating via cell phones, enjoying online church services, and continuing studies through learning programs. Relevant future suggestions were advanced for managing the pandemic.

Key words: *COVID-19, Zulu, Coping, Resilience, Ubuntu, Culture, South Africa*



Introduction

South Africa has a notorious four-hundred-year history of colonialism, racism and, after 1948, Apartheid oppression, which privileged white, so called “European” people and disenfranchised other “non-white” people, arbitrarily classified as Black, Indian or Coloured (Cooper & Nickolas, 2012). Although formal democracy was established in 1994, this historical legacy of discrimination, including political and economic disadvantage, has remained. In the tertiary educational context, under Apartheid policy, separate universities were established along racist and ethnic lines. For example, in 1959, the rural University of Zululand was initially established exclusively for Zulu people. However, during long, violent, anti-Apartheid struggles, the historically Black Universities (HBU’s), Zululand University, gradually broke free from their historical, political, racial and ethnic shackles (Edwards, 2014). Today it is referred to as a “rural-based comprehensive university with an urban footprint” indicating growth to Richards Bay and other urban areas (<http://www.unizulu.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Curriculum-Development-Specialist.pdf>).

Census (2020) indicates a total South African population of about 60 million people, 80 percent of whom are Black African, and 12 million of whose home language is isiZulu, the largest of the 11 official languages. As an ethnic group, the Zulu people were independently forged into a nation by the great King Shaka in the nineteenth century. As was partially the case in colonial and Apartheid regimes, Zulu sovereignty under King Goodwill Zwelithini is currently fully recognized and respected in the present South African democratic system. The earlier history of isiZulu speaking people is immersed with that of the Bantu, the isiZulu collective noun for ‘people’, who emigrated from the forests along the Nile River Valley (Wiredu, 2004). Significantly and meaningfully, this collective human ethos strongly continues in the philosophy and practice of Ubuntu (Hlongwane et al., 2018). The essence of this philosophy exists in the idiom “*umuntu umuntu ngabantu*” which literally means that a person becomes a person through other people. The existential truth behind this saying is strongly supported by evolutionary evidence that human social relationships were crucial in enabling humanity to survive and thrive (Jobling, Hurles, & Tyler-Smith, 2004).

Stress refers to a challenge to people’s capacity to adapt (Slavich, 2016). It is endemic for contemporary humanity (Robinson, 2018). Social support has long been recognized as a vital resource in coping with stress (Zee, Bolger, & Higgens, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a planetary wake up call, especially for humanity to get its act together. The South African COVID-19 lockdown experience, which began on 27 March 2020, has been extended indefinitely owing to the likelihood of the rife spread of the pandemic in many South Africans who live in densely populated urban areas, townships, temporary housing conditions and informal settlements, commonly referred to as a shack lands and/or squatter camps. Connotations of the word “lockdown” inevitably bring to mind Nelson Mandela’s tiny cell on Robben Island. Wonderful to relate how this great man transformed humanity as did Buddha,



Christ and Mohammed. Authors of this paper, who have worked at Zululand University will have experienced incidents of violence, suffering, and collective action, where the rallying slogan “an injury to one is an injury to all” remarkably applies to present COVID-19 international health context interventions (Edwards, 2014).

This philosophy strongly applies amongst indigenous people across planet earth who have traditionally honoured life as a deeply interconnected whole. Similar to other African communities, Zulu people have long recognized the survival value of harmonious interpersonal, social, ecological and spiritual relationships. To prevent disorder and chaos, people are expected to work at maintaining harmony, especially through ancestral consciousness and socially coherent relationships. Motivation for the present study arose from a previous study amongst a relatively affluent South African urban community (Edwards, Thwala, & Edwards, 2020). Further investigations and interventions amongst less affluent, as well as rural groups in South Africa were clearly indicated. The particular research question arose as to how rural Zulu people will experience coping with COVID-19 when denied normal social relationships, which constitute an existential pillar of customary way of life?

Method

Data Collection

Convenience sampling was employed to collect data from isiZulu speakers only, using a questionnaire that examined experiences, views and ways of coping with COVID-19 during lockdown. A snowball sampling method was used to select isiZulu participants who were likely to openly and honestly share information on COVID-19. Email was the main method of contacting the majority of participants. An attempt was made to diversify the sample. Questionnaires were sent to a few colleagues as well as young and old people who showed interest in sharing information. A few participants preferred to give verbal answers which were then documented by the principal researcher. During interviews, participants adhered to rules of social distancing and wearing a mask. All participants gave permission to document their information without mentioning their names. The predominant observation during interviewing was that participants freely shared their views. Strong opinions were held as to the Zulu King’s responsibility to alert the nation and prevent the pandemic. Strongly resilient feelings were expressed of standing together in fighting the pandemic. Human, social responsibility for the pandemic was also expressed. Respondents were asked to provide their age, sex, experiences and ways of coping with the lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic. Anonymity was guaranteed and required ethical research standards assured.

Participants

There were 9 males and 9 females, with a mean age of 46.83, standard deviation of 20.72, median of 46, and range of 15 to 80 years. The sample had a wide range of 3 to 19 years of formal education with a mean of 12.67 (SD 5.44) years. In terms of religion, 8 were orthodox Christians, 7 belonged to an Afro-Christian church and 3 exclusively followed African ancestral beliefs and practices. Nine were formerly employed or self-employed, 3 unemployed, 3 were students and 3 pensioners. The relatively high mean level of education and employment is understandable when considering that the sample were collected in a University environment. The relatively high incidence of traditional African ancestral orientated religious view probably reflects the rural environment. Otherwise, as evident in the participant's data, Africa, south of the Sahara is predominantly Christian. This probably reflects the influence of colonialism as well as Apartheid policy of "National Christian Education" which was (mis)used to buttress the pillars of that nefarious system of forced racial oppression. Resiliently, the largest Southern African religious organization, the African Indigenous Church (AIC) movement, inclusively embraces both ancestral consciousness/reverence and Christianity. This movement, with religious roots in the African National Congress, founded in 1912, deserves special mention for its role in preventing violent civil war among warring political groups, during and after Apartheid struggles (Edwards, 2011).

Data Analysis

Raw data were subjected to three levels of analysis. Firstly, two researchers independently ran NVivo and MAXQDA analyses, which provided a course sieve for further data analysis. Secondly emerging themes were independently elicited by two researchers. Thirdly, final themes were consensually validated, integrated and relevant examples chosen for this report. The final themes that follow were based on the participants total response set, with special reference to their views on coping and dealing with the pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

The study will follow ethical standards in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Institutional approval is obtained from the Zululand University research committee, project number S894/97. The authors include Psychology Professors and clinical psychologists attached to this University.

Results

The eighteen participants responded to the questionnaire in great depth and detail. A full range of emotional experience was reported, including shock, fear, anger, depression and acceptance. Such experiences required adjustment, learning and various behavioural change. The focus of

the following findings is specifically on people's coping experiences and management recommendations. "People" was the most important overall word concept and "change" was the most important coping word concept.

First Theme: People. In our humanity, emotional, communicative, social and spiritual relationships. Participants' coping responses typically indicated resilient support for each other in all the change brought about by the pandemic. As expected, this was the single most recurring theme in all eighteen profiles, with its essence being communal spirituality. All participants' responses focussed on this theme. In other words, this main theme most resonates inclusively with isiZulu terms for Divine Consciousness/Creator/God (*Mvelingangqi.Nkulunkulu*), Spirit (*uMoya*) as experienced and expressed through people (*Ubuntu*) (Ngubane, 1977).

"Let us go back to our roots as African people" (D, Female, aged 79).

"People must protect one another" (K, Male, aged 19).

"Covid-19 has shown us how much we need each other as families, friends, colleagues, and neighbours; how interdependent we are globally. It has taken us back to what we should have been doing all along as people, i.e. taking care of our health. It has brought us together as we are fighting one invisible giant enemy threatening to sweep off all of us. The sad part is that we are all in this together but there are people who are not respecting restrictions regulations which makes it difficult to flatten the curve We need to go back to God and seek His favour and intervention through this difficult time that never was before" (Q, Female, aged 42).

Second Theme: Action. Innovative change and/or appropriate, ethical, corrective, or routine behaviour was mentioned in fifteen participants' responses. The main focus was shared community responsibility to change appropriately and re-establish homeostatic harmony to prevent destructive or antisocial behaviour. Participants coped well through exercises, gardening, prayer and sharing stories.

"Going to stores such as BOXER has been very scary where people share one mask to enter the shop" (I, Male, aged 36).

"People should be patient and respect one another. Politicians must stop making statements to gain popularity while it is not going to promote lives on ordinary people" (J, Female, aged 15).

"Punishment for wrong doing including: raping young children, disrespect to our elderly people" (G, Male, aged 35).

Third Theme: Culture. Cultural and/or traditional cultural ways of coping responses typically concerned attributions or correction rituals required. In the following examples, *Isilo Samabandla onke* is a figurative way of describing the Zulu king, in his traditional leopard skin attire. As participant indicates, a typical cultural ritual, for example in times of drought, pollution (*umnyama*) or plague (*isikhonyana* – literally locusts), an appeasement (*ukushweleza*) ceremony would be performed by persons of purity such as young virgins (*izintombi*) on spiritual such as mountain tops.

“I strongly feel that *Isilo Samabandla onke* should have instructed *izintombi* to go to the mountain and pray (*ukushweleza*) for all of us to prevent this darkness (*umnyama*) or punishment before we all disappear” (B, Male, aged 62).

“This is a total destruction like a thunderstorm that destroys maize fields. It is like *isikhonyana* which quietly comes in numbers and wipe off all plantations” (M, Female, aged 28).

“Let the king instruct a group of people especially young virgins to go to the mountain and do the necessary ritual. In the past, when there was no enough rain we would go to the mountain and ask for rain etc. I expect King Goodwill Zwelithini to have a voice to what I have suggested. It has taken too long. A group of people, e.g., should approach him. Inkosi MG Buthelezi should also know this” (O, Male, aged 63).

Fourth Theme: Time. Twelve participants’ temporal responses were collectively existential human references and/or biblical in nature. Human existence, temporality and emotionality include experienced time, moment to moment, time together as well as clock time.

“I spent most of the time at home with family members. We shared stories when there were deadly diseases and how people coped” (B, Male, aged 62).

“Listening to radio church services. Staying in the house and doing gardening from time to time and doing small exercises within the home yard” (M, Female, aged 28).

“We need to go back to God and seek His favour and intervention through this difficult time that never was before” (Q, Female, aged 42).

Fifth Theme: Home. Staying at home was mentioned nineteen times by twelve participants. This COVID-19 mandatory activity seems to have been beneficially experienced.

“Staying home and encouraging my grandchildren to behave as instructed by the president, religious leaders, law enforcement agencies” (D, Female, aged 79).



“I stay at home obey the rules. Play music and listen to pastor on a Sunday. This has helped me a lot” (I, Male, aged 36).

“Listening to music staying at home and reading my books so that when we return to school I can cope. I have matured and gained experience through reading and watching television news. I do exercise every morning” (J, Female, aged 15).

Six Theme: Technology. Twelve participants mentioned coping through using technology such as internet, online church services or using SMS.

‘It also meant staying more in doors with limited at time no physical communication with people and more reliance on internet connection’ (A, Female aged 59).

‘We watch a lot of news but for church we use church pastors online’ (C, Female, aged 58).

‘Use cell phone for contacting relatives far from home. I use SMS to keep myself busy with constructive ideas from supportive people’ (E, Male, aged 47).

Seventh Theme: COVID-19 was mentioned twenty times by eleven participants. After their initial shock, participants reported resilient and responsible adaptation to the new reality, in following the necessary health protocols.

“COVID-19 is going to be with us for a year or even longer therefore a behaviour change is imperative. We all have to adhere to COVID-19 protocols, wearing of masks all time when leaving the house, washing of hands, not touching our faces, using of sanitisers, social distancing etc.” (A, Female aged 59).

“We should be friendly and kind to our environment. I mean let us treat the Earth is God. Let us appreciate one another and protect nature wherever we are. Of course, cleaning of hands, observing distance and eating healthy are vital for preventing the spread of COVID-19” (N, Male, aged 45).

“To me COVID-19 means a change and adapting to a new normal in many things. Lifestyle change; change in the workplace as we all are forced to work remotely, even when we are together, we are forced to socially distance from each other; change is schools as they also have had to adopt e-learning using WhatsApp; google classroom etc. Almost everything has changed and life will never be the same” (Q, Female, aged 42).

Eighth Theme: Life. Adjustments meant life and lifestyle and personal change as noted by eleven participants on twenty occasions.

“COVID-19 has made me change my lifestyle and my philosophy of life in many ways. With the lockdown regulations in place I had to stop traveling which was a big part of my life and I even had to stop going to church which is what I did every Sunday to sustain my spiritual wellbeing” (A, Female, aged 59).

“Prayer has dominated my life. It has become stronger and stronger every day (F, Female, aged” 76).

“My life has positively changed with regard to my behaviour. If I do not contract this pandemic/*ukhondolo, isijeziso* (confession, punishment) I will be a changed person” (G, Male, aged 35).

Ninth Theme: Family. The extended family system has always been a great source of strength in Zulu society. This has strengthened according to participant P, who adaptively assumed the role of priest as well. Similar themes were mentioned by eight other participants.

“When we have family talks, we appeal to ancestors to save us as a family. We also pray as a way of appealing to *Umvelinqangi* (Creator God) to assist the nation” (B, Male, aged 62).

“We team up with family members by using modern technology particularly those that are far away from home” (H, Male, aged 25).

“I became more aware of what family means. We became stronger as a family unit. Shared knowledge of past tragic events and how people survived. I was not aware of the skill I had to hold a mini church service as a “priest”. I have managed to connect with God as a family. We also relied heavily on online lessons from different church denominations. I know I am ready to pass on, but for children and grand grandchildren I used the last energy to unite family” (P, Female, aged 80).

Tenth Theme: Rules. Since the days of the great King Shaka, rural isiZulu society has been described as well-organized and disciplined. The views of eight participants resonate with this observation.

“I comply with all the rules laid down by the government but I am not sure what is going to happen when we start going back to work” (E, Male, aged 47).

“I complied with all the rules of lock down” (G, Male, aged 35).

“Through following the rules as per president’s announcement. We team up with family members by using modern technology particularly those that are far away from home. Mum and Dad give us hope all the time” (H, Male, aged 25).



Eleventh Theme: World. The interconnectedness of all in the global village was a theme mentioned by eight participants.

“Maybe we, the whole world, should also fast for a week” (C, Female, aged 58).

“We listened to the news and we immediately picked up that the whole world is affected by this dark cloud (*umnyama*)” (H, Male, aged 25).

“Only some of the deadliest flu ever in the world. What is different is that they do not feel that they are created or known to be from China. Research is underway to find a solution. As long as there are survivors of the pandemic, the hope is that they will be overcome” (R, Male, aged 52).

Management Recommendations

The following specific management recommendations were considered a faithful representation of the views held by this particular sample of Zulu respondents.

“We have to learn to live with COVID-19 and intentionally try to reduce or even stop it from spreading. Each person should protect themselves and those around them by following the COVID-19 health protocols” (A, Female, aged 59).

“Let us go back to our roots as African people” (D, Female, aged 79).

“Let the Health practitioners lead in educating people” (G, Male, aged 35).

“Eat healthy food, exercise and protect others. Schools, universities and colleges should embark on online learning” (J, Female, aged 15)

“Government should be leading the programmes that assist communities to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Each family should take responsibility to protect its members. “Community should also protect its members” (M, Female, aged 28).

“We should be friendly and kind to our environment. I mean let us treat the Earth as God” (N, Male, aged 45).

“Let the king instruct a group of people especially young virgins to go to the mountain and do the necessary ritual” (O, Male, aged 63).

“Both scientific and indigenous knowledge should be utilized in dealing with this pandemic/ubhubhane/isijeziso (punishment)” (P, Female, aged 80).

“We need to go back to God and seek His favour and intervention through this difficult time that never was before” (Q, Female, aged 42).

Discussion

The research question as to how Zulu people, well known for their communal spiritual culture and traditional beliefs and practices would experience coping with COVID-19 was well answered. When considering contemporary global population prevalence of stress, anxiety and depression (Salieri et al., 2020), the present sample generally indicated resilient, adaptive coping responses. The COVID-19 pandemic was recognized for its danger, yet also treated as such dangers had been in the past, especially via family and community. In addition, participants actively used contemporary resources, communicating with others through cell phones, enjoying online church services, and continuing studies through learning programs. Participants’ views resonate existential and humanistic dwelling in a feeling world in sympathy and empathy with others. Traditional Zulu cultural views of COVID-19 included a time of pollution (*umnyama*) contagion *umkhondo omubi*, and practicing abstinence (*ukuzila*) (Edwards, 2011; Ngubane, 1977).

In his seminal 2007 work, *Being and Time*, Heidegger (2008) attempted to uncover the fundamental structures of human existence. Two recent works have given attention to such human, existential/experiential time, or temporality as distinct from, physical chronological time (Gruber, Montemayer, & Block, 2020; Zhao, 2020). Essentially, this meaning of time enables, and is enabled by, human existential meaning in life. Participants experiences resonated more deeply with what may be considered human, existential/experiential time, as distinct from physical time references, e.g., FaceTime, break-time, device time. While COVID-19 may have been described as a difficult time by Participant Q, it also provided opportunities for lie and lifestyle changes as note by Participant A and Participant G.

Indigenous knowledge systems throughout Africa have long recognized the profound interconnectedness of everything, where plants, animals, humans, ancestors and all creation interdependently coexist. Such knowledge seems to have been passed on by such giant scholars as Imhotep and Plotinus (Wiredu, 2004). This recognition is typically associated with contexts such as communal ceremonies, associated with heightened consciousness, insights, morality and ethical behaviour (Nsamenang, 1992). Such consciousness facilitated Credo Mutwa’s (1998) mission to document and preserve African indigenous knowledge. The participants in the present study recognized the vital importance of co-ordinated human health action against the pandemic and were actively engaged in appropriate health promotion at various levels of response ranging from global and national recommendations though local cultural action to routine social distancing, wearing of masks and washing of hands.



The tiered and triangulated methodology provided some assurance as to the faithfulness, representativeness and dependability of the findings for this particular sample of rural Zulu people. However, the relative affluence of the sample in terms of education and employment should be noted. The resilient strengths experienced and expressed in coping strategies employed may not be found in other South African samples. Further studies are needed in this regard. Participants' management recommendations constitute one future avenue for investigations and related interventions.

Conclusion

Answering the open-ended research question as to how a sample of rural Zulu people would respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, eleven main, overlapping, rank-ordered, experiential coping themes emerged. Themes respectively concerned people, action, culture, time, home, technology, COVID-19, life, family, rules and world. The intrinsic strengths, resilience and healthful social relationships experienced and expressed by the sample were impressively noteworthy. From a management perspective, participants recognized the need to mobilize familial, community and international relationships, as well as both indigenous and scientific knowledge systems, to reduce the spread of the virus through adherence to appropriate health protocols.

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