

Making Sense of the Problem: Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry of COVID-19 Students

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to understand students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic through semi-structured interviews. The study involved 102 key informants for a research paper and they were the students studying management at TU. Storytelling by the participants is a powerful tool for understanding life experiences and promoting discussion on current issues. Inquiry is increasingly used in educational research as human beings are telling their experiences to talk about particular time and events. Data revealed negative impacts on personal life, learning, working life, and social-emotional experiences. The study suggests that educational stakeholders should focus on students' voices to engage, motivate, and support students' personal, working, educational, social, and emotional well-being. The emphasis should be given to the importance of student voice in their lives. For this, the storytelling method was used, which is a powerful tool for understanding life experiences and promoting discussion on current issues. This project used narrating inquiry to gather information about the COVID-19 experiences of the students and it used content analysis methodology to analyze responses from students' narrative inquiry interviews, revealing their positive and negative experiences.

Keywords: content analysis, COVID-19, change, narrative inquiry, storytelling

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic lockdown obliged the government of Nepal to decide to issue the notice about the restriction of movement of people, and running classes, and forced teachers and students of different campuses run under the universities to rethink their class schedules. Mpungose (2020) states that traditional physical modes of teaching-learning excluded students' experiences, and they shifted to digitalized modes of classes. The pandemic has led to significant restrictions on mobility, the closure of businesses, and limited social relationships, resulting in personal issues and increased unemployment rates (Lim, 1996, Ashford, Lee, 1989). Historically, pandemics have increased psychological problems, anxiety, depression, and stress levels in the population (Wilson & et al., 2020). It highlighted the need for new types of learning solutions. Carrillo Flores (2020), Mpungose (2020), and Wimpenny et al. (2020) talk about the challenges of academic staff poor online teaching infrastructure, inexperience, information gaps, and a complex home environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted global life, causing economic, political, educational, social, and domestic changes (Kolak et al., 2021). Precautionary measures

like lockdowns, university closures, and stay-at-home orders (Smith et al., 2020) disrupted learning and teaching, causing widespread disruptions in their lives. To teach students basic research skills, campuses redesigned class patterns to fit lockdown restrictions and instill ethical principles. Apart from learning in the physical and online classes, students were asked to share their memories about family life, working places, careers, and social life. Clandinin (2013) indicates telling personal experiences deals with telling the narrative skills of learners. Their observation about the situation and personal experiences during the lockdown led to a narrative of personal experiences in Kathmandu, Bagmati Province.

This paper used a narrative framework of study focusing on changing behavior that happened for students who were at the bachelor level of different campuses of Tribhuvan University (TU) and now studying master level in four different constituents run under the Faculty Management located in Kathmandu Valley. This paper builds on and adds to previous studies in other contexts (Levine et al., 2021; McGaughey et al., 2021; Nash and Churchill, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted various aspects of lives, including working life, mental health (Charul et al., 2023), and financial stability (Zhao et al., 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic revealed key lessons such as resilience, redemption, self-discovery, personal strategies, academic skills, realization, acceptance, and resignation. The research process supports participants in creating shared meaning and fostering ideas. This paper focusing on narrative research covers issues of family life, social life, working life, and educational life. It has been used to explore the impact of the pandemic on academic life, focusing on human narratives that have intrinsic resonance and meaning.

This research aims to understand students' lives during times of crisis and upheaval, highlighting the complex interconnected uncertainties and multifaceted impacts of such events. The purpose of this paper is to explore and understand the experience of COVID-19 students in the family, social, working, and educational sectors. To identify the answers, the narrative analysis focuses on questions as follows:

1. As students, what were your experiences of COVID-19 in 2020?
2. What lessons have you learned relevant to your personal life connecting with family, social, working, and educational sectors during the same time?

Purpose of the Present Paper

The pandemic that affected Nepalese students in different fields has significantly impacted students' perceptions and engagement with academic careers and family life, necessitating a deeper understanding of the long-term impact of online learning. This research aims to investigate the university students' experience studying across Nepal in 2020, and the study was conducted in 2024 following a qualitative approach. Now these students are studying in Kathmandu Valley. The study has examined the challenges and adaptations of the new life, academic engagement, personal career, and social life.

Literature Review

The study focuses on narrative inquiry and content analysis as the theoretical foundation for students' work and the method of analysis for research. Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into the experiences of others and ourselves, allowing researchers to understand how humans experience the world within a constantly changing framework (Clandinin & Berendonk, 2017; Clandinin, 2013). The study must be flexible and aware of the ongoing nature of the story, as well as the subjectivity of these narratives. Marchlinska, et al.(2023) talk about the study to investigate students' experiences of education, social interaction, and personal during the COVID-19 pandemic using reflexive and student-centered approaches.

Content analysis was used to analyze texts produced by students, such as newspaper publications, literary texts, and open-ended interviews (Gilstein, 2020). The conventional approach was used to describe the phenomenon, as it obtained information directly from participants without preconceived ideas. Content analysis can be used to study media content, gather intelligence, or research social sciences and literature. In this study, the students' information became the text data that could be analyzed. Carmine et al. (2021) the uncertainty surrounding the pandemic affected the people and led to increased tensions among global supply chains. These tensions have triggered managing economic and social lives. Time has also created exploring knowledge. COVID-19 was a threat and had a major negative impact on mental health (Charul et al., 2023) which led the common people to depression. The pandemic has provided opportunities for technological solutions for knowledge sharing and communication but also created tensions around transparency. Despite these challenges, the crisis has also created entrepreneurial opportunities and opportunities for exploiting cultural gaps.

COVID-19 has significantly impacted global life, affecting working life, mental health, and financial stability. Stancer (2024) accepted that the pandemic was a complex time; its interrelated issues made life difficult to manage. Zhao *et al.* (2022) made life very complex in Australia, and people narrated their stories about mental health. In short, narrative inquiry and content analysis are essential research techniques for understanding human experiences and the experiences of others. By incorporating individual experiences and reporting on stories, the researcher has provided valuable insights into TU students' experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic in 2024.

Research Methodology

Due to university closure and academic year plans, the students faced many problems. The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of students during lockdown using a narrative inquiry approach. They interpreted stories from them and analyzed transcripts from five-month interviews from 2024 January to May. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) identified three content analysis techniques: conventional, directed, and summative. The conventional approach used in this study directly obtains information from participants to explore phenomena without preconceived notions. Connelly and Clandinin (2006) deal with the narrative inquirers engaging with participants through telling stories or living out of stories to enter into the midst of ongoing stories.

The relationship between research purposes, transitions, and how to make it useful are its major factors. Clandinin (2006) states narrative inquiry is prominent in social science

research to emphasize the role of stories narrated by the participants collectively. This approach aims to create meaning and enlist help in building findings and conclusions. These negotiations occur moment by moment to work with participants throughout the inquiry. Content analysis can be used to study media content, gather intelligence, or research social sciences.

Design and Data collection procedures

The study explored the experiences of 102 students studying on the constituent campuses under Tribhuvan University (TU). At present, they studied management on campuses C1, C2, C3, and C4. Similarly, in 2024, they studied marketing (43), finance (38), and accounting (21). Moreover, in 2020, they studied Bachelor's in Bagmati (60), Koshi (18), Gandaki (16), and 8 students in Madhes Provinces.

Ilker, Sulaiman, and Rukayya (2016) state that convenience sampling is a nonprobability or nonrandom sampling method where members of the target population are included based on practical criteria like accessibility, geographical proximity, availability, or willingness to participate. Convenience sampling is used with 102 respondents from various areas of Nepal. The participants were from various occupations, such as private organizations (32), financial sectors (8), business owners (11), teachers (7), and students (44). Students were asked open-ended questions for conducting interviews to explore their experiences of the pandemic period. It focused on both positive and negative impacts, basing its interpretations and reports on information. Students were interviewed on four familiar issues that they experienced during the lockdown, i.e., family (personal) life, working life, educational (learning) life, and social life. For this, face-to-face interviews were conducted from January 2024 to May 2024. The researcher also conducted focus group discussions with students of four constituent campuses studying management to explore their life experiences.

Data analysis

This study used a narrative technique as a content analysis approach. It converted the text into narrative and identified common themes. The narrative inquiry was linked with thematic coding to categorize the stories into 'negative' and 'positive' values. The study aimed to establish trustworthiness and validity by explaining the method, design, data collection, and analysis processes. The study's findings are relevant to understanding students' lives who suffered in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Findings

The findings are presented in terms of themes identified during the analysis, namely the broad categories of positive and negative experiences of family life, social life, work life, and educational life. Interviews were conducted with 65 male and 37 female respondents. Out of the 102 respondents, only 48 discussed their family lives as the pandemic spread rapidly and their parents were helpless in rural areas. 37 participants discussed working careers and they got problems. They were involved in different organizations and offices. 9 key informants talked about their educational lives. The government had notified them to close the classes, and they were only worried about educational sectors. Only 8 respondents were worried about their social lives and they were fully detached from the community people. Even they had no idea about the

things happening in their community and only the rumor and distressed situation worsened their individual and family lives.

COVID-19 and Family Life

The lockdown has had a profound negative impact on individual and family life. It affected their economic aspect and life was very difficult to manage financially. The majority of the respondents were from rural areas, and pandemic relief grants were not sufficient. They expressed distress for their families and relatives. There was no connection between the respondents and their family members. They had the emotional impact of losing family members during COVID-19. Life was insecure and complex. Some of them expressed that their family members had lost their jobs which caused trouble in the family situation.

Out of 102 respondents, 48 respondents talked about their family status and situation. Interviewees who were not at home in the first spread of COVID-19 found it difficult to visit their homes. The government restricted to run public transportation and travel was not easy. Though the Nepali government set up a fund for the pandemic, it was difficult to get relief which increased stress in family life. The beneficiaries of the grant were only a handful of people who were in political and economic power. Living with family members in lockdown was a little bit easier. Out of 48 respondents, 4 interviewees saw the dead bodies of their own family members. They lost grandparents and others also. The environment in the village was noisy, and people had negative assumptions about the pandemic-affected people. Similarly, 6 respondents saw the symptoms of the pandemic in their family members. The financial impact of the pandemic on families is alarming, and the emotional trauma of losing family members to COVID-19 is terrible. One participant from C4 expressed about her experience in the following way:

I was in Pokhara. I am from Myagdi. My two brothers are in Japan and Australia. There are parents in Myagdi. My home is far away from Beni. In the middle of April 2020, I went home. There was a rumor that a patient with COVID-19 was admitted to Baglung Hospital. There was a fear of life in the village. All the time, we used to listen to news from FMs and TV about the pandemic-affected people. The news spread from China, Italy, America, Australia, Japan, India, etc. was fearful. The situation of life even in Kathmandu was frightening. We used to see dead bodies occurred in COVID-19 in Ayaghat Area. The dead bodies were thrown by the security forces for managing the bodies. I used to think about how their family members were thinking. At that time, there were some people affected even in Myagdi which caused the level of stress in my life. However, my father used to assure me about the confidence of life.

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted individual and family life. It affected the students who were struggling to socialize. Despite this, some students found no way to socialize. The pandemic has disrupted their academic journey, and it put stress on them and caused them to poor lives.

COVID-19 and Work Life

The lockdown had significantly impacted their work lives. It caused stress, fear, and anxiety. Only the essential workers were allowed to attend the workplaces. 37 participants out of 102 respondents discussed their working careers. 47 respondents were involved in jobs. 11 participants were busy handling some kind of business. Even the people involved in their

profession had given priority to their family issues. 12 respondents lost their jobs, and worried about their prospects in getting jobs.

Business owners experienced income loss and had to send employees home, and it caused anxiety about the future. Some workers in the financial sector attended the offices in shift work using personal protective equipment. Community health workers faced extreme changes to ensure staff safety and had to work in shifts. Business owners faced negative consequences, such as crop farmers not being able to purchase necessary supplies and alcohol sales being banned. New business owners struggled to build up a buffer against unforeseen circumstances, and catering businesses closed. Public relations companies put company' promotion on hold. The lockdown has delayed businesses, affecting their growth and survival. One participants now studying Marketing at C1 has narrated her experience as:

I am from Birgunj. We are three children of my parents. I have two elder brothers. My father is a schoolteacher. My mother is a housewife only. I was a teacher in a private school. The government issued a notice to close the schools in April 2020. I have not got any salary from February. The salary was not good either. Only I had joined in that job for my pocket money. As the school closed, I called many times to school, but I got no response at all. I had to stress whether I would not get money. Again there was no certainty of the job at school. Luckily, I was happy as I was with my parents. I feel like I wasted my time in school and gained nothing from it. I lost my job, as if I was not getting salary and psychologically I was not in good condition.

The lockdown has severely impacted their finances. They were unable to continue with regular activities. Some interviewees have reported reduced hours and lower income due to lockdown restrictions. The temporary workers involved in private organizations worked shorter hours and received lower payments. The informants involved in teaching at private schools affected heavily in their lives. The teachers have also faced issues with students not attending classes due to fear of contracting the virus.

COVID-19 and Education Life

The pandemic has significantly impacted students. The educational career of participants was at risk. Educational institutions were closed. There was no environment for attending the classes. It was uncertain about the exams. The loss of the academic year had caused concerns about living in the areas where campuses were located or returning home. After a long time, online teaching was in effect, but it was not effective due to poor networks and technological devices. The students had no specific knowledge of how to set up the teaching and learning devices to continue the academic year. One of the respondents studying finance now at C3 expressed his experiences as:

There was distress of the pandemic in Chitwan. I had no job. We are four sisters at home. I am the second daughter. My elder sister is already married and is in Pokhara. My parents do not have any jobs. Only the agricultural profession is the source of income and food. There was no easy way to go to the market and buy things. I was short of money, so it was difficult to manage my life. I am from Gorkha. By chance, I got a bus and went home. I saw my father lying in bed and said he had a headache. I had a fear of his condition. Luckily, the next day he looked fine. There was a notice about online classes, but no ideas about setting up the classes online. There was a problem with the network in the village. Data were expensive for classes. Only I was thinking

about my educational career. I had no option, and 2020 was full of fear, anxiety, etc.

Even at present, I am facing the effects of COVID-19 in my educational life.

Students have reported difficulty with online classes. They needed more data, which was expensive. During the crisis, they were not able to afford enough data, which caused fear in life. They also struggled to interact with classmates and lecturers about the difficulties of adopting the new mode of teaching sessions. The students found it difficult to obtain a trainee position due to the lockdown. Most students expressed their inability to cope with online learning due to network connectivity and data issues, and the challenge of listening to lectures over electronic devices. They referred to online learning as a nightmare.

University learners have expressed anxiety about adjusting to online learning, the loss of study time during the lockdown, and fearing for their future. They were worried about contracting the virus and submitting tasks with little preparation. However, students are grateful for the time spent with family and educational life.

COVID-19 and Social Life

The majority of the respondents were unable to attend funerals or cultural festivals. Some family members were unable to honor their relatives who were dead. Travel restrictions made life very difficult to give fire to close family members. Some respondents felt they could not be present for the community during funerals to show their support in sorrow. Out of 102 respondents, only 8 participants talked about their social lives. Due to COVID-19 traditions and customs were affected. The lack of enforcement of lockdown rules, such as the ban on alcohol and curfew, was a concern for many respondents.

The strict lockdown has negatively affected social life. Some respondents started writing poetry, songs, and stories to comfort the distressful condition. They urged the importance of exercising yoga and following pandemic rules and regulations. Despite some challenges, some respondents found positives from the lockdown. One participant from C2 has narrated the stories as:

There was no social life. I was thinking there was no day and night. Only I used to think we were living in a night. Life was terrible. Hope was not there. News broadcasted on radios and TVs were negative only. I saw the dead bodies in Koshi Province. People were crying. There was no one to console the people. Life was fragmented. No good thing at all in the society. However, I learned some positive lessons from COVID-19. My assumption was life does not move in a straight line only. We have to face the challenges. Knowing about technology, living for many days at home only, and being away from relatives and friends are some kind of phenomena and we have to adjust to them.

Overall, the lockdown has had a significant impact on social lives and experiences. Some people have the effects of the pandemic whereas some people are getting positive lessons from COVID-19. The COVID crisis has significantly hampered societal life. It had led to social conflicts and contestations. It impacted people's movements, social interactions, and school classes. COVID has also led to increased self-restrictions and indicated a new normative repertoire in public spaces. These issues question the justification of specific measures and their influence on public and private boundaries within the society

Discussion

The study investigates the pandemic experience among the students who are studying management on four different campuses (C1, C2, C3, and C4) of Tribhuvan University. This discussion among the 102 participants explores the negative impact and challenges of COVID-19 in 2020. Even in 2004, the people who faced the pandemic differently had negative impacts on their family lives, work lives, educational careers, and social lives. However, some of them have coped with the situation positively and learned positive lessons from it. The findings reveal that Nepali students focused more on family lives than other lives. 48 participants were inclined to family issues, and 37 participants were worried about their work lives. Participants who were given priorities in educational careers and social lives were nominal. Only 9 participants talked about the educational sector and 8 participants shared their stories about social lives. This discussion focuses on the research question first and identifies the family, social, working, and educational lives of participants which was the research question second.

The coronavirus-induced lockdown significantly impacted individuals' life with self-assessment of stress. Education, and resource inequalities highlight structural differences and socio-economic problems of the family status. The pandemic has led to a decrease in satisfaction with work and life satisfaction among those who were the students at different campuses. Life satisfaction among those without job was not good. Psychosocial assessments reveal that those with job either lost the job and faced troubles. They told their own stories and events that they experienced during COVID-19. They learned relevant things to face the upcoming challenges about individual life, family life, economic situation, social, working, educational sectors.

Conclusion

The paper revealed that participants studying management at TU had high levels of stress and trauma about family, work, education, and social issues. The lack of training and tools for students further affected the situation, and it highlighted human resilience. It explores students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic using semi-structured interviews. It highlights the negative impacts on personal, work, learning, and social-emotional aspects. The storytelling method as in this paper was used to understand students' experiences. It promotes discussion on current issues and any specific issues and events in the twenty-first century. The experience of students prompted sensitive discussions about the pandemic's impact on lives. It uncovered aspects of themselves and others during a crisis, and revealed their academic roles and relationships. This process also provided benefits for participants. Narrative inquiry is increasingly used in educational research, as humans are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives. This paper surveys forms of narrative inquiry in educational studies, outlining criteria, methods, and writing forms. It discusses risks, dangers, and abuses in narrative studies and presents a two-part research agenda for curriculum and teacher studies based on stories of experience and narrative inquiry. The study explores the meaning-making process of social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants used self-care strategies to describe impacts, social responsibilities, and the challenges they faced. The study highlights the importance of storytelling and research participants suggest potential strategies for individual and collective processing is significant.

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