

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE FLOOD VICTIM-PSYCHOSPIRITUAL MODULE: SPIRITUAL-RELIGIOUS STRATEGIES

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### **Abstract**

*The investigation sought to explore the spiritual-religious coping strategies applied by post-flood victims. A total of 14 respondents in Kelantan and Sarawak have been recruited in this investigation. The study has utilized the mixed-method design, specifically the exploratory sequential design. The analysis conducted has yielded that the spiritual-religious coping strategies (i.e. acceptance towards God's provision, faith, and religious practices) are important aspects in coping with post-flood situations. The application of the spiritual-religious coping strategies will enable those who are at risk of facing flood disaster to be better prepared in terms of managing and minimizing the psychological impacts of the disaster.*

*Keywords: Spirituality, religiosity, psychospiritual, coping strategies, flood disaster, flood victims*

### **Introduction**

Flood is one of the most common disasters in Malaysia, which are usually driven by both environmental or human behaviors such as climate change, poorly structured development of infrastructures, as well as the unusual increase in water level at a certain period of time [1]. In Malaysia, floods occur every year, especially during the monsoon season. Flood disaster is the most intense natural disaster experienced in Malaysia [2]. The 2014-2015 flood disaster was the worst disaster recorded in Malaysia as the flood has hit the whole country. Kelantan is the most flood-prone state followed by other states including Sarawak. Flood disaster poses a significant threat to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual-religious wellbeing of the victims. An appropriate psycho-spiritual intervention is needed because the psychological and spiritual-religious disturbances due to flood disaster are certain. Thus, the strategies of spiritual and religious approaches among flood victims require further exploration to develop an intervention.

### ***The 2014-2015 Flood in Kelantan and Sarawak***

The 2014-2015 flood disaster was the most significant and largest flood recorded in Malaysia. During the end of 2014 and early 2015, a total of 541,896 flood victims involving 136,447 families were affected by the disaster [3]. This was also recorded to be the most devastating flood in decades [4]. Kelantan was one of the most flood-prone states in Malaysia which have disrupted the lives of 339,703 flood victims involving 87,024 families [3]. The National Security Council (NSC) recorded that the massive flood that hit Kelantan was the worst in the history of the state [5]. The continuous heavy rain which fell in Gua Musang caused the water level of Sungai Galas in Dabong, Gua Musang, to rise drastically above the water levels considered dangerous [6]. According to the eBanjir Negeri Kelantan [7], Sungai Galas recorded the highest measure of water levels of 46.47 (danger level: 38 meters).

The same situation applied to Sarawak where the flood affected the lives of 16,490 flood victims, which consists of 4,475 families [3]. Although not as bad as the state of Kelantan, the high intensity rainfall in early 2015 has also caused major flooding across several parts of Sarawak,

primarily in Kuching. As part of the northeast monsoon, the continuous rain also affected most areas in Sarawak. According to Malaysian Meteorological Department (MMD), the Kuching Division was expected to receive 900mm of rain in comparison to the other divisions in Sarawak that was projected to receive between 400mm to 500mm of rain [8]. However, the floods that occurred left many low-lying areas in the south of the state of Sarawak submerged in water, forcing the victims there to evacuate.

### ***The Impact of Flood Disaster on Spiritual and Religious***

Natural disasters poses a significant threat in various aspects such as psychological and emotional stress. Some of the effects of flood disaster experienced by the victims include loneliness/being isolated, depression, changes in psychological conditions, fear, demoralization, stress, and anxiety [1,9,10]. Disaster is a detrimental experience, and its recovery is a gradual process. Most disaster victims are quite resilient and experience moderate psychological disturbances, which they can easily recover [11]. However, some disaster victims possess low level of resilience, and it is often difficult for them to overcome these stress caused by the disaster. Some of the stress experienced by post-flood victims includes psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual stress [11].

In a spiritual context, amongst the reactions of post-disaster victims include questioning their faith, questioning God, self-comforting by telling themselves that the victims are with God, dependence on prayers, etc. Hence, spiritual coping strategies is a must for disaster victims. The spiritual and religious element can serve as unique mechanism to gradually improve the lives of disaster victims [1].

Spirituality and religiosity are substantively related to each other, as both shared the idea of the sacred (i.e., things set apart from the ordinary, connected to the divine) [12]. However, the definitions of both vary, spirituality is typically aligned with subjective, personal beliefs, whereas religiosity is identified with traditional, institutionally related practices and behaviors [13,14]. Spirituality occurs both within and separates from religious institutions [13].

Religious behaviors and thinking to manage stress and trauma has been used by many people in various situations [15]. Religious involves the beliefs in a just and loving God, the experience of God as a supportive partner, involvement in religious rituals, and the search for spiritual and personal support. These approaches were significantly related to better outcomes, such as improvement of the victims mental health and their spiritual growth [12,16]. Negative spiritual coping refers to questions, confusion, or anger towards God [17]. Positive spiritual outcomes include feelings of being closer to God, one's faith community, and one's significant others [16].

Religiosity and spirituality can offer a powerful narrative and transcendent meaning in the face of trauma [18]. When an individual uses religious beliefs or practices as a way of adapting to physical, psychological, and social challenges, this is termed religious or spiritual coping. Research on religious and spiritual coping suggest that purpose and meaning in life are associated with lower levels of PTSD symptoms and higher levels of positive emotions. However, when an individual's belief system is unable to make sense of the trauma or failed to assist the individual in finding an intergrated narrative, then the trauma can trigger newfound questions about the existence of God and meaning in life. Spiritual struggle can result in greater levels of PTSD symptoms and complications towards positive recovery.

Studies regarding spirituality and religiosity among flood victims in Malaysian have been documented [1,15,19,20,21]. But these studies did not qualitatively explore the spiritual-religious strategies of post-flood victims and have yet to develop a psychospiritual intervention. Besides, no single module of psychospiritual for flood victims have been developed in Malaysia. In fact, the variety of beliefs systems among Malaysian such as Islamic, Christianity, Buddhism etc may influence these spiritual-religious strategies. Therefore, it is important to identify local beliefs – spirituality-religiosity – facing with peritraumatic and posttraumatic events. In this study, we intended to explore the spiritual-religious strategies among flood victims and to develop

psychospiritual module for flood victims. In this particular investigation, an immediate response intervention module, the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies will be developed. Therefore, this study will 1) qualitatively explore the spiritual-religious coping strategies among post-flood victims, and 2) will develop the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies.

## **Methodology**

### ***Research Design***

The study has applied the exploratory sequential design, which begins with Phase 1: Qualitative study (interviews) and the interim phase (the development of the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module), and Phase 2: Evaluating the content validity of the module.

### ***Participants***

The participants selected for this study derived from the pool of victims recorded under the Department of Social Welfare Malaysia (JKM) in Kuching, Sarawak and Gua Musang, Kelantan. They were selected by a purposeful sampling method. A total of 14 participants (11 from Kuching and 3 from Gua Musang) were involved in this investigation. The study was taken conducted in the Gua Musang county of Kelantan and in Kuching which is the capital of Sarawak, Malaysia.

### ***Procedure***

A permission to implement the study are obtained from the JKM. The statistics of the 2014-2015 flood victims from all over the country were also obtained from the NSC. After the approval, the study was conducted based on the advices from the JKM. During data collections, the selected victims were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and all the data obtained will be used confidentially. Participants were then asked to fill in the consent form for their agreement to participate in the study. Data were gathered using in-depth interview (using Malay language) which took about an hour. The interview were conducted through the face-to-face method.

### ***Interview Protocol***

As mentioned above, this study employed an in-depth interview method using semi-structured questions to obtain qualitative data regarding participants' spiritual-religious experiences in relation to the flood disaster. All interview questions were open-ended to allow participants to provide a fresh commentary concerning their experiences and opinions [22]. Interview protocol was developed for this study involving questions such as "During the flood, do you panic, worried, sad, cry, or angry?" and "What activities that you have done after the flood to rebuild a new life?" Interview were voice-recorded and transcribed. Upon completion, participants were provided the opportunity to withdraw as well as to delete any information from their interview.

### ***Data Analyses***

The collected data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis and validated through the process of investigator triangulation and member checking as suggested by Bengtsson [23]. The data analysis phase focused on validating the contents in the FV-PSM which is conducted by an expert in disaster psychology. Content validity is a systematic assessment of the quality and accuracy of contents in a module [24].

### ***Module Development Process***

The development of module takes into account the various rules and procedures to produce a fully effective module [25]. The Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies development process is based on Ahmad Jazimin *et al.*'s [25] Module Development Model.

## Results

### *The Spiritual-Religious Strategies*

The qualitative data were analyzed using the open coding approach. Thematic analysis indicated that spiritual-religious strategies are the coping mechanism applied by post-flood victims. Table 1 displays the responses by flood victims regarding the spiritual-religious strategies.

Table 1

*Analysis of the responses by flood victims regarding the spiritual-religious strategies*

#### Responses

*Kalau mereka memerlukan, kami akan datang. Kami melihat keadaan orang itu...Kadang-kadang kami mengatur upacara sembahyang untuk bagi kaunseling...Kadang-kadang di rumah...Ya. Di rumah boleh juga (R1).*

*Kami ada buat satu seminar pasal agama. Bila seminar tu, kita sentuh pasal agama kita lah. Bila berlakunya banjir kita balik semula kepada agama kita dan kita akan banyakkkan doa supaya bencana-bencana sebegini tidak kena kepada kita yang paling teruk lah. Sebab Tuhan tidak memberikan kesusahan yang terlampau yang menyebabkan kita tidak mampu berbuat apa-apa. Dalam menerima hakikat tapi kita tetap berusaha mencari jalan untuk mengurangkan rasa kesusahan itu (R2).*

*Komuniti AJK menziarahi mangsa banjir. Melihat muka mereka pun sudah syukur, sudah menjadi satu cara meredakan perasaan mereka, mendengar aduan-aduan mereka. Kita akan cuba mencarikan bantuan kepada mereka. Jika mereka hilang arah, mati kutu, mereka akan minta saya mendoakan mereka...Kadang-kadang kita buat jempunan. Kita melihat keadaan mereka yang susah. Kita berdoa agar Tuhan memberikan rahmat, sekurang-kurangnya mereka tidak terasing (R3).*

*Sebab sampan tak banyak, kereta pun tak dapat bantu sebab dah terkepung. Jadi ada yang berdoa (R4).*

*Tak tidur sebab bercerita pasal banjir tu lah. Ada yang sembahyang hajat, berdoa. Aa...macam-macam gaya lah kami meminta pertolongan Allah...Ramai-ramai pun ada, seorang-seorang pun ada...Perempuan-perempuan tu asing. Yang perempuan tu tak ramai lah sebab perlu jaga anak ramai. Yang kami buat tu untuk lelaki sahaja...Aa...ada ruang lah. Masa air tengah bertahan tu, makin kami buat sembahyang hajat. Ada rehat, ada yang tidur. Yang tak tidur pun ada, duduk dalam hujan (R5).*

*Allah Taala berikan kepada kita. Tu sebab kita perlu minta daripada Dia juga (R6).*

*Dekat sini pun doa. Macam pak cik cakap kepada adik ni tadi, semua orang berdoa (R7).*

*Doa dia tanya pak cik baca apa? Nak baca tu boleh juga yang panjang pun kan? Tapi yang mudah tu "Ya Allah, Ya Tuhanku" macam tu je. "Aku meminta pertolonganMu, berhentikanlah." Aa...kita perlu minta pertolongan daripada Dia. Kalau tak nak minta tolong, dari siapa? Kalau tenggelam dah tak dapat minta tolong dengan orang lain lah. Saya kongsi sikit lah (R8).*

*Ceramah pun ada (dikendalikan oleh Ustaz) (R9).*

*Semua ranap. Baru sikit. Allah beri sikit (R10).*

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### ***The Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies***

In the effort to improve the resilience of flood victims, the activities that will be presented subsequently are spiritual-religious approaches that could facilitate the revival of their psycho-spiritual functions. Spiritual and religious interventions are important aspects for flood victims as the majority stated that the events that happened to them is under the power of God. The Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies consists of three activities including 1) accepting God's provision, 2) spiritual/faith, and 3) religious practices.

#### ***Activity 1: Accepting God's Provision***

The victims felt '*redha*' or an acceptance of God's provision over what has happened to them. The disaster that happened is God's work and they have to turn back to God. This acceptance exists as they are aware and conscious that God is 'testing' them. Thus, in this activity, the victims were given the opportunity to gain a peace of mind or self-calm through the relations with God according to their respective beliefs. They are empowered to express their feelings and thoughts through self-expression so they will be able to express their spiritual-religious and have more confidence in their relation with God to facilitate their life further. Thus, the victims may recover or regain their spirituality/religiosity-based resilience.

#### ***Activity 2: Spiritual/Faith***

The second activity is performing spiritual and faith-related activities. Prayer is one of the most important spiritual practice to flood victims. Prayer may initially be a struggle because of the feeling of guilty from a particular act, being too close or not being in control to communicate with God, feeling of anger, betraying or leaving the relationship with God, etc. The initial challenges to praying should be tackled by aid providers patiently as it is not something which is wrong, or needed to be corrected, but as a normal set of reactions of the flood victims. In line with this intention, this activity were developed to facilitate flood victims by using 'prayer' as a strategy to strengthen their relations with God and change their thoughts from negative to positive. The victims will be able to communicate and express their wishes to God, thus they may calm their thoughts and feelings.

#### ***Activity 3: Religious Practices***

The third activity is performing religious practices as a recovery process. Restoring and reconnecting the spiritual resources of flood victims is imparative either personally or collectively, in which it could be facilitated by religious practices. This could be done through reading of religious books/scriptures, arts, musics, prayer, meditation, and other religious related practices. The recovery process could begin through mutual informal feedbacks among friends or family, corporate worships, formal feedbacks and support groups, counselling or therapy. In addition, group exercises are effective in promoting self-disclosure, or fostering relationships with others. Religious practices for flood victims can be divided in to two categories namely, specific worships such as praying, and general worships such as *usrah*, group sharing or lectures, education, the reading of verses from religious books or scriptures, etc. This activity attempted to elevate the victim's depressed thoughts, feeling of lost, rebuild hope, cope, and not blaming themselves, others or God for what happened to them through *usrah*, program or prayers performed in religious institutions (mosques, churches, and temples).

### **Discussion**

This study seek to explore the spiritual-religious coping strategies among post-flood victims, and to develop Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies. The open coding conducted has led to the construction of themes related to spiritual-religious

strategies. Based on the spiritual and religious strategies, the study successfully developed the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies which involved the acceptance of God's provision, spiritual/faith, and religious practices activities.

### ***Spiritual-Religious Strategy***

Disaster is a very detrimental experience, and its recovery is a gradual process. Spiritual disturbances caused by disaster are sometimes more critical in comparison to property damage, financial lost, or homelessness. This is due to the fact that an individuals' spiritual beliefs determines how they perceive the world or their surroundings. Hence, disaster victims may seek comfort from their beliefs, and spiritual beliefs might be able to assist victims in coping with post-disaster stress, and developing resilience. Likewise, disasters could also lead to spiritual turmoil, as victims tries to make sense of the disaster event.

Spiritual-religious intervention is a crucial element for flood victims as the majority of the respondents have stated that what has happened is due to the power of God. These interventions are important as prolonged stress responses that could not be treated will disrupt the daily functioning of the victims. Spiritual beliefs influences how individuals perceive and understand the world [11]. In this context, flood victims may seek comfort from their spiritual beliefs. These spiritual beliefs will enable the victims to cope and develop resilience with traumatic events. Disasters could also challenge individuals' spiritual beliefs as they try to comprehend the meaning behind what they have experienced. Studies have shown that religious struggles among disaster victims are often associated with negative emotions as well as depletion in physical health, in which most victims seek spiritual support to aid their struggles. A study has proven that religious practices are able to improve resilience among children. Cultural values and practices specific to children have enabled them to function within their scope of capabilities [26].

Most disaster victims are quite resilient and experience moderate psychological disturbances, which they can easily recover. Some of the stress experienced by postflood victims includes psychological, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, physical, and spiritual stress. In a spiritual context, among the postdisaster victims reactions include questioning their faith, questioning God, self-comforting by telling themselves that the distressed are with God, dependence on prayers, etc. [11]. Resilience refers to the ability of individuals, families, organizations, or communities, to adapt to any forms of challenges [11]. Resilience also refers to the ability to reconstruct, to accept difficulties, to seek the meaning of life, to respond positively to difficult situations, to be able to handle stress, to have hope, to modify unwanted situations in to wisdom "*hikmah*", and to have insights, compassions, and patience [11]. It is a fact that depressing events in life are unavoidable. However, individuals could be better prepared to respond positively to negative events, which can be achieved by building and promoting resilience.

The spiritual-religious aspects could facilitate resilience in flood victims [14]. This aspects may include positive outlook in life (enhance confidence and coherence, explanations and answers), meaning and purpose (providing - in most cases - assurance that each individual is special and has a purpose, whereas negative experiences are perceived as contributors to spiritual development and maturity, which could lead to other positive outcomes), psychological integration (providing a belief system that assist individuals in interpreting life events and which gives them a sense of coherence, and helps them to be better prepared to integrate negative events in to their existing worldview), hope and motivation (promote understandings that something better will occur in the future, helping to cope with despair in relation to severe lost and destruction, and inspiring individuals to make necessary changes in order to cope with tough situations), empowering individuals (giving disaster victims the resources to make a difference in their situation, such as praying for strengths to cope, healing an injury, or healing of loved ones who are ill), sense of control (controlling whether they can communicate or "influence God" or "give in from controlling God"), role model (a model that assist individuals to accepts their circumstances as well as providing ways to overcome them), a guide to decision making (provide guidance in reducing stress

as well as encouraging positive coping behaviors such as not using substances/drugs), explanations (provide answers to questions that cannot be tackled by culture or science, providing a sense of having answers to phenomenon), and social support (encouraging community spirit, encouraging individuals to care for one another).

### ***The Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies***

In regards to the development of the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies, accepting God's provision, spiritual/faith, and religious practices activities was developed to improve the well-being of flood victims through forming relationships with God.

After the activities and programs required have been identified, a draft of the FV-PSM has been made. A module is developed based on various rules and procedures in order to produce a module that is effective in its applications [25]. A module is considered effective when it is able to assist the clients in mastering the objectives forwarded by the module. The ability to master the module's objectives by the client is heavily related to adhering to the procedures created by the module developer(s) [27].

Stress is a common phenomenon for disaster victims. Reactions that are driven by stress could be very detrimental if it is not intervened, in which the stress symptoms are experienced constantly until it disrupts the daily functioning of individuals. Some of the spiritual reactions brought about by stress includes questioning faith, self-blame/criticism, questioning/doubting God, anger towards God, sidelining faith and religion, questioning positive and negative events, etc. [11]. Studies has found that across various stressful life situations, religious coping strategies of acceptance, hope, and spiritual growth is consistently associated with improved psychological outcomes [28].

Prayer is one of the most important spiritual practice to flood victims. There are various types of prayers unique to an individuals' spiritual beliefs. Prayers may be comprised of those that have been taught, or personal prayers that have the intention of obtaining something. Researchers has forwarded the following benefits of prayers: 1) prayers could help flood victims to be more connected to God, 2) prayers could assist flood victims to articulate clearly what is needed to recover, 3) prayers could assist flood victims in verbalizing what they have been blessed with, 4) prayers could assist flood victims to stay connected to their religion, 5) prayers could assist flood victims in letting go of uncontrollable phenomenon and focused on those that could be controlled, 6) prayers could act as social support for flood victims, 7) prayers could assist in calming or relieving flood victims, 8) prayer could be used to help flood victims feel empowered to heal and/or has been given peace by God, the community of the faith, as well as individuals who are associated with the victims [29].

Hence the intervention of accepting God's provision, spiritual, and religious practices is forwarded for flood victims in order to build resilience, as well as minimizing the psychological and spiritual impacts of the disaster. Some of the disaster victims have questioned the power of God, in which their thoughts and actions need to be corrected by rebuilding their relationship with God through prayers, acceptance (*redha*), as well as other religious practices. Consequently, spiritual and religious intervention is imperative, specifically for flood victims.

### ***The Content Validation for the PsychoSpiritual Module for Flood Victim***

The Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM) has been reviewed by an expert (a professor), who is a professional social worker and a social work professor in Department of Social Welfare, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Muhammadiyah University of Jakarta. His expertise includes the psycho-social aspect of disaster, micro social work practices, social work education and training, children's welfare, psychosocial aspects of chronic and terminal diseases (oncology, mental illness, etc.). The investigation has only appointed one expert reviewers in order

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to reduce conflicting consensus on the contents [30]. Overall, the comments given by the expert were helpful in improving the module.

### **Conclusion**

The investigation is conducted to explore the spiritual-religious coping strategies among post-flood victims, and to develop the Flood Victim-PsychoSpiritual Module (FV-PSM): Spiritual-Religious Strategies. The main contribution of this study is the development of a psychological intervention module specific for flood victims. This module can be applied by relevant personnel in the effort to assist flood victims who are experiencing trauma, and require assistance in their spiritual-religious aspects of life.

### **Acknowledgement**

The research team would like to express our highest gratitude to the Ministry of Education (MOE) which has funded the study through the Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRG0408-SS-1/2015).



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Article received 2019-04-11