

Freedom From Outlawed Religious Subjugation: Life's Journey of Rescued Members of Religious Cults

Joel Ray Louie H. Trinidad, RCrim¹, Atty. Dodelon F. Sabijon, PhD.²

¹Faculty, University of Cebu Main Campus, Sanciangko St., Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines

²Dean, College of Criminal Justice Department, University of Cebu Main Campus, Sanciangko St., Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines

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Email of Author: louie.hermoso.trinidad@gmail.com

Abstract

This study explored the lived experiences of rescued former members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated (SBSI) in Socorro, Bucas Grande, Surigao del Norte, Philippines. Anchored on Routine Activities Theory, Differential Association Theory, and Subcultural Theory, the research aimed to examine the experiences of informants during their involvement in the religious cult, assess the impact of government intervention programs after their rescue, and identify their aspirations for improving rehabilitation and reintegration programs. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed using transcendental phenomenology. Data were gathered through in-depth individual interviews using a validated researcher-made interview guide, supplemented by field notes and audio recordings. The participants consisted of ten rescued former SBSI members selected through purposive sampling. The findings revealed that the informants experienced coercion, manipulation, forced obedience, economic exploitation, isolation, and psychological control while inside the cult. The narratives also showed the gradual erosion of bayanihan and family values, leading to emotional distress, regret, and long-term trauma. Government intervention programs, including psychosocial support, shelter, food assistance, and livelihood aid, contributed significantly to the recovery and reintegration of the informants and their families. However, the participants emphasized the need for sustainable livelihood opportunities, long-term mental health support, housing assistance, and stronger protection measures to ensure successful reintegration and safeguard survivors from retaliation. The study concludes that cult involvement results in severe psychological, social, and economic consequences that require sustained institutional intervention and community-based support systems. The findings support Sustainable Development Goal 3 (Good Health and Well-Being) through the promotion of psychosocial recovery and mental health support, and Sustainable Development Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through strengthened protection, governance, and intervention mechanisms for vulnerable individuals and communities. The study contributes to social, institutional, and community sustainability by promoting survivor rehabilitation, public awareness, and evidence-based strategies for preventing exploitation and strengthening social protection systems.

Keywords: Bayanihan, Cult Victimization, Government Intervention, Phenomenology, Rehabilitation, Religious Cults, Survivor Reintegration

1. Introduction

Religious cults are socially isolated groups that deviate from mainstream belief systems and often revolve around charismatic leadership, strict ideological control, and manipulative organizational structures. While some individuals join these groups in search of belonging, purpose, or spiritual fulfillment, many cults have been associated with coercion, exploitation, abuse, and criminal activities. The increasing concern regarding cult-related victimization highlights the need to examine the psychological, sociological, and criminological dimensions of these organizations, particularly their recruitment methods, systems of control, and effects on members and communities. This study focuses on the experiences of rescued members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated (SBSI) in Socorro, Bucas Grande, Surigao del Norte. Allegations involving forced marriages, child exploitation, coercive control, financial manipulation, and paramilitary activities intensified public concern regarding the organization. Through the narratives of rescued members, the study seeks to understand the lived experiences of individuals during cult membership, assess the impact of government intervention programs, and identify aspirations for improving rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives.

1.1 Background of the Study on Religious Cult Experiences in Socorro, Surigao del Norte

Religious cults commonly establish insular communities centered on distinct ideologies and charismatic authority. These groups often attract individuals experiencing vulnerability or seeking meaning and belonging. Recruitment strategies such as “love bombing” create emotional attachment and dependency, gradually distancing members from their families and social networks. Cults may also impose financial obligations, restrict relationships, and normalize harmful or criminal

behaviors within the group structure. Such dynamics contribute to ethical, psychological, and legal concerns surrounding cult operations. In Socorro, Bucas Grande Island, Surigao del Norte, the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated (SBSI) became the subject of investigation following allegations of human trafficking, child abuse, forced marriages, coercive control, and exploitation. Reports indicated that members were persuaded to relocate to Sitio Kapihan following claims of an impending doomsday event after the 2019 earthquake. Members were allegedly pressured to surrender assets, contribute income, and comply with organizational directives. Authorities also reported cases involving minors placed in common-law relationships with adults, resulting in accusations of abuse and exploitation. Allegations of paramilitary training further intensified concerns regarding the organization's influence over members. The study aims to examine the lived experiences of rescued members, evaluate the effectiveness of government interventions, and identify recommendations for improving rehabilitation and protection programs for individuals affected by cultic organizations.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature on Cult Recruitment, Control, and Victimization

Several studies explain the psychological, sociological, and organizational mechanisms employed by cults and new religious movements. Wilson (1982) emphasized that cults emerge as responses to societal secularization, offering alternative belief systems that address existential and personal needs overlooked by traditional institutions. Similarly, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) argued that cults flourish during periods of social instability and cultural transformation, providing members with identity, purpose, and community. Research by Lifton (1961), Schein (1961), and Hassan (1988) examined coercive persuasion and psychological manipulation within cult environments. Lifton (1961) explained how thought reform techniques reshape identity through isolation, ideological control, and dependency. Schein (1961) described coercive persuasion as a process involving emotional manipulation, social isolation, and cognitive destabilization. Hassan (1988) introduced the BITE model, which categorized cult control into behavioral, informational, thought, and emotional domains. Studies by Singer and Lalich (1995) and Lalich (2004) highlighted manipulative recruitment tactics such as love bombing, emotional dependency, and bounded choice, where members perceive coerced actions as voluntary decisions. Barker (1984) and Lofland and Stark (1965) emphasized the importance of social relationships, personal crises, and contextual pressures in conversion to cultic groups. Other scholars explored structural and sociocultural dimensions of cult dynamics. Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) discussed frame alignment processes that enable movements to attract and sustain membership. Puttick (1997) examined gender dynamics and vulnerabilities within cults, particularly among women. Palmer (1993), Cowan and Bromley (2015), and Zeller (2014) emphasized the complexity of new religious movements and cautioned against oversimplified assumptions regarding cults. Studies examining violence and extremism within cultic organizations further revealed the dangers of charismatic leadership and ideological absolutism. Chidester (1988) analyzed the Peoples Temple tragedy as an outcome of radical devotion and apocalyptic beliefs, while Lewis (2011) explored the relationship between new religious movements and violence. Langone (1995) focused on rehabilitation and reintegration strategies for former cult members, emphasizing counseling, psychological recovery, and social support systems. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that cults operate through complex systems of psychological influence, social control, ideological manipulation, and organizational dependency that can result in exploitation, victimization, and long-term trauma.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Cult-Related Exploitation and Intervention

Globally, cultic organizations and new religious movements have drawn attention due to incidents involving manipulation, abuse, violence, and mass victimization. Cases such as the Peoples Temple and Heaven's Gate illustrate how ideological extremism and authoritarian leadership can result in severe psychological and physical harm (Chidester, 1988; Zeller, 2014). Nationally, the Philippines has experienced growing concern regarding cult-related exploitation, particularly in isolated communities where social vulnerability, economic hardship, and limited institutional oversight may contribute to recruitment and control. The SBSI case in Socorro, Surigao del Norte, reflects broader concerns regarding human trafficking, child protection, coercion, and community manipulation. Government agencies, including the Philippine National Police (PNP), Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), and Local Government Units (LGUs), have become increasingly involved in intervention, investigation, rescue, and rehabilitation efforts. These institutional responses highlight the importance of multidisciplinary approaches involving criminology, psychology, social welfare, law enforcement, and governance.

1.4 Theoretical and Legal Basis of the Study on Religious Cult Dynamics

This study is primarily anchored on Routine Activities Theory (Cohen and Felson 1979), Differential Association Theory (Sutherland, 1939), and Subcultural Theory (Cohen, 1955). Routine Activities Theory explains that criminal behavior occurs when motivated offenders encounter suitable targets in the absence of capable guardianship (Cohen and Felson 1979). This framework helps explain how isolated cult environments may create opportunities for exploitation and abuse. Differential Association Theory emphasizes that criminal behavior is learned through social interaction and exposure to deviant norms within intimate groups (Sutherland, 1939). The theory is relevant in understanding how cult members may internalize manipulative beliefs and criminal behaviors through prolonged group interaction. Subcultural Theory argues that deviant subcultures emerge when individuals experience frustration in achieving societal expectations through legitimate means (Cohen, 1955). Cultic groups may therefore function as alternative communities that reject mainstream

norms while rewarding loyalty and conformity. The study is also supported by legal frameworks in the Philippines. The 1987 Philippine Constitution protects religious freedom while prohibiting unlawful practices that violate human rights. Republic Act No. 9208, as amended by Republic Act No. 10364, criminalizes human trafficking and exploitation. Republic Act No. 7610 protects children from abuse, exploitation, and discrimination, while the Revised Penal Code addresses offenses such as illegal detention, fraud, and abuse. These legal provisions provide institutional mechanisms for addressing cult-related victimization and protecting rescued individuals.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale for Examining Rescued Cult Members' Experiences

Despite increasing public concern regarding cult-related victimization, limited criminological and sociological research has examined the lived experiences of rescued cult members in the Philippine context. Existing studies primarily focus on theoretical discussions of recruitment, psychological manipulation, and organizational structures, with fewer studies exploring post-rescue experiences, rehabilitation, and government intervention effectiveness. The SBSI case presents a significant opportunity to investigate how cultic systems affect individuals, families, and communities. Examining the narratives of rescued members contributes to understanding patterns of coercion, exploitation, trauma, and recovery. The study also seeks to assess how government programs influence the reintegration and well-being of rescued individuals and identify areas for improving support systems and intervention strategies.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being, SDG 5 – Gender Equality, SDG 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities, and SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions. The research supports SDG 3 by addressing psychological trauma, rehabilitation, and emotional recovery among rescued cult members. It contributes to SDG 5 through discussions of forced marriages, exploitation, and abuse involving women and minors. The study also supports SDG 8 by examining financial exploitation and barriers to socio-economic reintegration. Through its emphasis on legal protection, institutional intervention, and justice mechanisms, the research aligns with SDG 16. By highlighting vulnerabilities that contribute to cult recruitment and victimization, the study also supports broader efforts to reduce social inequalities and strengthen community protection systems.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by addressing socio-economic, psychological, institutional, and community dimensions of cult-related victimization. From a socio-economic perspective, the findings may support sustainable rehabilitation and reintegration initiatives for rescued individuals and families. In terms of public health sustainability, the study emphasizes psychological recovery, emotional well-being, and trauma-informed support systems. Institutionally, the research may assist government agencies, law enforcement, and non-governmental organizations in developing evidence-based intervention strategies and preventive programs. Community sustainability is strengthened through increased public awareness of manipulative recruitment practices and exploitation tactics. The study also contributes to criminology, sociology, psychology, and public policy by providing empirical insights into coercive organizations, victimization processes, and rehabilitation mechanisms. Ultimately, the research supports sustainable governance and social protection efforts aimed at safeguarding vulnerable individuals and communities from exploitation and abuse.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design using transcendental phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of former cult members. This approach emphasized understanding personal experiences and interpretations to uncover the essence of the phenomenon under investigation (Ramsook, 2018). Rooted in the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, transcendental phenomenology focused on consciousness, lived experiences, and empathetic interpretation rather than researcher subjectivity. Husserl explained that understanding human experience requires examining the structures of consciousness and the concept of “inner or original time-consciousness,” which connects human experiences with temporal awareness (Warren, 2009). The study adopted a descriptive case study orientation to provide a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences within the cult, their reasons for leaving, and their adjustment after rescue. This approach emphasized empathy, reflection, and direct examination of participants' narratives to gain meaningful insights into cult involvement and recovery processes (Husserl, 1913). The research design also enabled the researcher to analyze how participants interpreted their experiences and how they attempted to rebuild their lives after leaving the organization.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Municipality of Socorro, which encompasses the entire island of Bucas Grande in Surigao del Norte, Caraga Region. The municipality faces the Pacific Ocean to the east and is bounded by the Municipality of Dapa in the north and the Carrascal-Cantilan peninsula in the south. Socorro has an estimated land area of 12,445 hectares and

approximately 20,000 hectares of seawater. The location was selected because it served as the primary area associated with the operations and activities of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated (SBSI), making it highly relevant to the investigation of cult-related experiences and community impact.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The study involved ten informants who were rescued members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated. These individuals were selected because of their direct experiences within the organization and their ongoing reintegration into society following rescue. The participants were also part of a government-protected witness group involved in legal proceedings against the organization's self-proclaimed leader. Their experiences provided detailed insights into recruitment, manipulation, control, abuse, rescue, and rehabilitation within the cult environment.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling in selecting participants who possessed firsthand experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Informants were chosen based on their prior involvement in SBSI, their willingness to participate, and their ability to provide detailed accounts of their lived experiences. The sampling procedure ensured that participants could meaningfully contribute information regarding cult membership, victimization, rescue experiences, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument used in the study was a researcher-designed Interview Guide (IG). The instrument was developed to gather detailed information regarding the participants' experiences within the cult, the effects of government intervention programs, and their recommendations for improving these programs. The interview guide was validated by a panel and reviewed by the Ethics Committee prior to implementation. The Interview Guide consisted of three major sections. The first section explored the informants' experiences during their involvement in SBSI. The second section examined the impact of government programs on the participants and their families after rescue. The third section elicited participants' aspirations and suggestions for improving government intervention and support services. Open-ended questions were utilized to encourage participants to narrate their experiences comprehensively. Creswell (2012) emphasized that qualitative interviews involve direct interactions between researchers and participants to gather rich and detailed information. Interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription, while field notes supplemented the recordings to capture observations and follow-up details. Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, their right to withdraw, and other ethical considerations through informed consent forms. Narrative explanations and detailed descriptions of participants' experiences were carefully documented and organized throughout the research process. The narratives highlighted the participants' backgrounds, experiences during cult involvement, and perspectives regarding rehabilitation and government intervention. Additional descriptions explained the stages of data collection, transcription, coding, and thematic interpretation that guided the overall analysis of the study.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews to obtain detailed narratives from the participants. Prior to data collection, a transmittal letter was sent to the informants explaining the objectives, benefits, risks, and procedures of the study. The researcher also secured ethics approval before conducting interviews. After obtaining consent, participants signed informed consent forms signifying their voluntary participation. During the interview sessions, the researcher reiterated the purpose of the study and ensured that participants understood the procedures involved. Interviews were documented using a voice recorder and supported by field notes. Appropriate interview settings and schedules were arranged to ensure participants' comfort and convenience. Data collection involved individual interviews supported by audio recordings and written notes. Within 72 hours after each interview, the recordings were manually transcribed to preserve accuracy and completeness. The researcher ensured that the transcriptions faithfully reflected the participants' narratives and responses.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study utilized transcendental phenomenological analysis to interpret the lived experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 2014). The analysis process began with repeated reading and immersion in the transcripts to gain familiarity with the participants' narratives. Significant statements, recurring ideas, and meaningful patterns were identified through coding and thematic categorization. The researcher employed a hermeneutic circle during interpretation, alternating between individual themes and the broader context of participants' experiences to achieve deeper understanding (Gadamer, 1976). This process enabled the researcher to connect themes, experiences, and interpretations while remaining open to the participants' perspectives. Reflective dialogue and continuous examination of interpretations were conducted to ensure analytical rigor and accuracy. The cyclical process of reviewing transcripts, coding themes, and validating interpretations contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Gadamer, 1976).

2.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Creswell (2007) emphasized that ethical issues arise before, during, and after data collection. Due to the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences, confidentiality, trust-building, and non-judgmental interaction were prioritized (Kite et al., 2018). The principle of beneficence guided the study by ensuring that the research contributed positively to the welfare of former cult members through awareness, advocacy, and support. Non-maleficence was observed by minimizing harm through voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality measures, and emotional support during and after interviews. Justice was upheld by ensuring fair participant selection and authentic representation of participants' experiences. Autonomy was respected by allowing participants to voluntarily participate, control the pace of interviews, and provide feedback regarding the interpretation of their narratives.

2.9 Trustworthiness of the Research

The study ensured trustworthiness using the framework of Lincoln and Guba (1985). Referential adequacy was employed by preserving portions of raw data for future comparison and verification. Credibility was maintained through open-minded interviewing and accurate representation of participants' experiences. Dependability was strengthened through member-checking, allowing participants to verify the accuracy of interpretations. Confirmability was ensured through confidential handling of interview recordings and transcripts, with access restricted to authorized personnel only. Bracketing and reflexivity were also practiced throughout the study. The researcher consciously set aside preconceived assumptions influenced by media portrayals of SBSI and continuously reflected on personal biases during the research process. A research journal was maintained to document emotional responses, reflections, and evolving perspectives. This reflexive process ensured that the participants' voices remained central to the interpretation and analysis of the data.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Experiences of Informants During Membership in the Religious Cult

3.1.1 From Unity to Cultism: The Erosion of Bayanihan and Family Values

The informants described how the organization initially functioned as a community grounded in bayanihan, mutual assistance, and strong family relationships. Members supported one another during illness and financial hardship, and many informants grew up within the organization. However, the situation changed when the leadership shifted to Jerence Quilario, who claimed to be the reincarnation of Jesus. Informants narrated how fear-based prophecies regarding earthquakes and the end of the world led members to relocate to Kapehan. Over time, members experienced isolation, surveillance, restricted movement, forced obedience, and manipulation through family pressure. Informants revealed that the original spirit of cooperation and unity gradually transformed into a system dominated by fear, control, and submission. The findings demonstrate how a once community-oriented organization evolved into a restrictive and authoritarian structure. Differential Association Theory explains that behaviors and beliefs are learned through prolonged interaction within intimate groups (Sutherland, 1939). The informants' continuous exposure to the cult's teachings and leadership gradually replaced traditional bayanihan values with obedience, isolation, and dependency. Through repeated interactions and reinforcement, members internalized the cult's norms and accepted practices that contradicted their previous beliefs and family-oriented principles.

3.1.2 Coercion and Control: The Exploitation Under Cult Leadership

The informants revealed that the cult leadership exercised extensive control over members' lives through forced labor, strict attendance requirements, military-style training, punishment, and economic exploitation. Informants described being prohibited from leaving the compound, monitored by guards, deprived of food, and forced to surrender personal property and income. Others narrated experiences involving physical punishment, coercive marriages, mandatory labor, and psychological threats. Military-style routines, ideological meetings, and rituals were imposed to reinforce loyalty and obedience. Informants also described how fear, manipulation, and religious indoctrination compelled them to comply with the leader's directives despite extreme hardship. These findings illustrate how the cult systematically dismantled personal autonomy and created an oppressive subculture centered on obedience and dependency. Subcultural Theory explains how groups develop alternative norms and values that conflict with mainstream society (Cohen, 1955). Within the cult, loyalty, submission, and sacrifice were normalized and rewarded, while dissent and independence were punished. The findings further show how the cult leader exploited members' vulnerabilities by creating an isolated social structure that reinforced authoritarian control and sustained exploitation.

3.1.3 Regret: The Cost of Faith

The informants expressed deep regret regarding their involvement in the cult and reflected on the emotional, social, and psychological consequences of their experiences. Many described feelings of shame, guilt, and sadness as they recalled the suffering of their families, including children who were unable to attend school, receive vaccinations, or access proper nutrition and healthcare. Informants also shared painful memories of witnessing illness, deaths, punishment, and deprivation within the cult. Several admitted feeling deceived and manipulated, questioning why they allowed themselves

to believe the cult leader's teachings. The findings highlight the lasting psychological and social impact of cult involvement. Differential Association Theory explains that individuals learn behaviors and beliefs through close social interactions (Sutherland, 1939). Through prolonged exposure to the cult's teachings and authority structures, members gradually accepted exploitative practices as normal or spiritually necessary. However, after leaving the group, informants experienced remorse and emotional distress as they recognized the harmful consequences of their actions and decisions. The findings underscore the long-term effects of manipulation, isolation, and dependency within coercive religious environments.

3.2 Impact of Government Programs on the Lives of Informants and Their Families After Rescue

3.2.1 Empowered with Repaired Lives

The informants acknowledged that government assistance significantly helped them recover after rescue. They expressed gratitude for the shelter, food supplies, livelihood assistance, and educational support provided by the Local Government Unit (LGU). Informants emphasized that these programs helped address their immediate needs and provided stability after losing their homes, belongings, and livelihoods during their involvement in the cult. The assistance also enabled families to begin rebuilding their lives and gradually regain a sense of security. The findings demonstrate the importance of practical and institutional support in the recovery process of rescued cult members. Routine Activities Theory explains that the absence of capable guardianship increases vulnerability to exploitation (Cohen and Felson 1979). Government interventions addressed this gap by providing protection, supervision, and structured support systems that reduced the informants' vulnerability and facilitated reintegration into society. The findings also show how access to stable resources and routines contributed to restoring autonomy and resilience among survivors.

3.2.2 Cognitive Recovery: Restoring Autonomy

The informants emphasized the importance of psychosocial interventions and counseling programs provided by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). They explained that debriefing sessions, trauma counseling, and emotional support helped them process painful experiences and gradually recover psychologically. Informants acknowledged that both adults and children experienced trauma due to their experiences within the cult and that mental health support became essential in helping them regain emotional stability and confidence. These findings highlight the critical role of psychological interventions in trauma recovery and emotional healing. Differential Association Theory suggests that social interactions shape behavior, values, and emotional responses (Sutherland, 1939). Through counseling, support groups, and therapeutic engagement, rescued individuals were exposed to healthier social environments that encouraged emotional healing, resilience, and self-reconstruction. The findings demonstrate how positive social interactions and institutional support contributed to restoring the informants' autonomy and rebuilding their identities after prolonged exposure to coercive environments.

3.3 Aspirations of Informants to Improve Government Programs

3.3.1 Sustainable Reintegration and Economic Stability

The informants expressed a strong desire for sustainable livelihood programs, stable employment, housing assistance, and long-term economic opportunities. While they appreciated the government's immediate assistance, many emphasized the need for programs that would allow them to become self-reliant and independent rather than continuously depending on aid. Informants highlighted the importance of having jobs, businesses, and permanent housing to help them rebuild their lives and support their families. The findings indicate that rescued individuals aspire not only for survival but also for long-term stability, dignity, and independence. Subcultural Theory explains that individuals immersed in restrictive subcultures often struggle to reconnect with mainstream societal systems after leaving those environments (Cohen, 1955). Sustainable livelihood programs and economic support can help former cult members transition from dependency toward self-sufficiency and reintegration. The findings further emphasize the importance of addressing structural inequalities and providing opportunities that foster resilience and long-term social recovery.

3.3.2 Safeguarding Survivors

The informants expressed ongoing fear for their safety due to threats and hostility from individuals who remained loyal to the cult leader. Several informants stated that they felt unsafe leaving their homes because they believed they could be attacked or harassed by cult supporters. They requested stronger security measures and additional protection, especially for families with children. Informants also shared concerns regarding surveillance, intimidation, and retaliation from former associates within the cult. The findings underscore the continuing vulnerability of survivors even after rescue and rehabilitation. Differential Association Theory explains that cult members internalize beliefs and behaviors through prolonged interaction within deviant social groups (Sutherland, 1939). Even after leaving the cult, survivors continue to face the lingering influence of these social networks and ideologies. The findings demonstrate the importance of sustained protection, security measures, and supportive environments that can help survivors safely disengage from coercive systems and reintegrate into mainstream society without fear of retaliation.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study revealed that the rescued members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated experienced severe psychological, emotional, social, and economic hardships during their involvement in the religious cult. Their narratives reflected the gradual transformation of the organization from a community founded on bayanihan and mutual support into a coercive and authoritarian system characterized by manipulation, exploitation, fear, and loss of personal autonomy. The findings further showed that government interventions, particularly the provision of shelter, food assistance, psychosocial support, and rehabilitation services, played a significant role in helping the informants and their families recover and begin rebuilding their lives. Despite these interventions, the informants expressed the need for long-term livelihood opportunities, stable housing, continued psychological support, and stronger security measures to ensure sustainable reintegration and protection from potential retaliation.

The study recommends strengthening collaboration among local government units, law enforcement agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community stakeholders to prevent the resurgence of cult-related activities and improve support systems for survivors. Greater emphasis should be placed on community education, awareness campaigns, psychosocial interventions, livelihood assistance, housing support, and long-term reintegration programs to help survivors achieve self-sufficiency and emotional recovery. Enhanced monitoring of suspicious organizations, stronger coordination among government agencies, and the establishment of protective mechanisms for rescued individuals are also necessary to safeguard survivors and reduce vulnerabilities to exploitation. Future studies should continue exploring the long-term psychological recovery, reintegration experiences, legal challenges, and operational structures of cult organizations in the Philippines to strengthen policy development and intervention programs.

The study was limited to ten rescued members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated in Socorro, Surigao del Norte, which restricted the scope of perspectives and experiences included in the research. The qualitative phenomenological design focused primarily on the lived experiences of the informants and relied heavily on individual interviews, making the findings context-specific and not intended for broad generalization. Security concerns and the sensitive nature of the participants' experiences also required individual interviews and confidentiality measures, which may have limited the depth of disclosure in some narratives. Additionally, the study concentrated on the experiences of rescued members and did not include perspectives from active members, organizational leaders, or other stakeholders involved in the cult's operations.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest. This study received no external funding and was conducted with the participation of rescued former members of the Socorro Bayanihan Services Incorporated in coordination with the University of Cebu Main Campus. Participation was entirely voluntary, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and non-invasive methods such as individual interviews, field notes, and audio recordings were utilized throughout the study. All information gathered was treated with strict confidentiality, and no identifying information of the participants was disclosed in the research.

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