
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Paradigms and practices in the enforcement of drug law: work narratives of heads of the Philippine National Police Drug Enforcement Unit (PNP-DEU), Cebu City, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

The Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU) plays a crucial role in the local implementation of drug laws. As a specialized unit within local law enforcement agencies, the DEU is equipped with the necessary expertise and resources to investigate drug-related crimes and apprehend drug suspects. The DEU's intimate knowledge of local communities and its ability to build relationships with informants are essential for identifying drug hotspots and disrupting drug trafficking activities. In effectively carrying out its mandate, the DEU helps to reduce the prevalence of drug use and trafficking within its jurisdiction, contributing to the overall drug control efforts in the Philippines. The findings of this study are articulated through eight emergent themes, which describe both the positive and negative experiences of the informants. Positive experiences were represented by themes such as *"From Unlawful to Upright"* and *"From Shadow to Light"*. Negative experiences were captured by themes like *"A Badge of Honor is A Badge of Terror"* and *"Unseen Forces a Shadow of Horror"*. The challenges encountered by the informants in the performance of their duties were reflected in themes such as *"Facing Challenges in the Legal Process"* and *"Inter-Agency Cooperation"*. Finally, aspirations of the informants to improve the enforcement of drug laws were expressed in themes like *"Protection for the Guardian"* and *"Sustained Implementation for a Better Future"*. The study suggests the Philippine National Police should prioritize investing in state-of-the-art technology for surveillance and intelligence gathering, incorporating a community-centric approach to drug prevention and rehabilitation, and aligning its drug enforcement strategies with the national drug prevention policy.

KEYWORDS

Criminal Justice, Philippine National Police Drug Enforcement Unit (PNP-DEU), Phenomenological Study, Philippines.

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1. Introduction

The worldwide drug problem is a complicated matter with wide-ranging effects. Developing successful ways to address this problem requires an understanding of the global perspective on drug enforcement. In order to represent their distinct political, economic, and cultural settings, several nations have chosen different strategies and by analyzing these disparate tactics, we may pinpoint both productive and ineffective methods, gain insight from others' experiences, and eventually create more knowledgeable and potent policies to combat the world drug problem.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), International Narcotics Control Board (INCB), and World Health Organization (WHO) are key international organizations working to combat the global drug problem. The UNODC provides technical assistance, training, and policy advice to countries worldwide, while the INCB monitors treaty implementation and offers guidance on drug control policies. The WHO focuses on the medical and public health aspects of drug use and addiction, providing

technical assistance and guidelines to support effective prevention and treatment efforts. These organizations play crucial roles in coordinating international efforts to address the complex challenges posed by the illicit drug trade.

Drug situation in the Philippines showed that one in seven school-going adolescents in the country engaged in current illicit drug use (cannabis, shabu/amphetamine, ecstasy, rugby, or cocaine) in 2019. Protective factors (having close friends, peer, and parental support) and drug education (taught where to get help for drug problems, and taught about drug use problems) and school attendance were negatively associated, and individual and community level factors (psychological distress, provision or sale of illicit drugs, current alcohol use, and involvement in physical fighting) were positively associated with current illicit drug use. School and community programs and policies may target decreasing psychosocial stressors, promoting protective factors, and enhancing curriculum-based drug education among adolescents in the Philippines. To determine the causal relationships between drug education, protective and psychosocial factors with illicit drug use, further research is necessary.

The Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU) plays a crucial role in the local implementation of drug laws. As a specialized unit within local law enforcement agencies, the DEU is equipped with the necessary expertise and resources to investigate drug-related crimes and apprehend drug suspects. The DEU's intimate knowledge of local communities and its ability to build relationships with informants are essential for identifying drug hotspots and disrupting drug trafficking activities. In effectively carrying out its mandate, the DEU helps to reduce the prevalence of drug use and trafficking within its jurisdiction, contributing to the overall drug control efforts in the Philippines.

This study aims to bridge the gap in comprehensive research on the lived experiences and perspectives of Philippine National Police Drug Enforcement Unit personnel. These include research on the following: challenges encountered by PNP-DEU personnel, the coping mechanisms that PNP-DEU personnel adopt to deal with the challenges faced in performing their functions, and the aspirations of PNP-DEU personnel in the improvement of their duties and functions.

As a criminologist and teacher, conducting a study on the experiences of drug enforcement unit (DEU) heads can offer invaluable insights into the challenges and strategies involved in local drug enforcement. By examining firsthand accounts, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complex issues DEU heads face, such as resource constraints, corruption, and evolving drug trends. This knowledge can inform the identification of effective strategies and best practices, leading to improvements in drug enforcement policies at both local and national levels. Moreover, sharing these insights can educate future criminologists, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and skills to address the evolving challenges of drug enforcement.

2. Literature Review

This study is anchored on the Adaptive Leadership Theory of Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009), and supported with two theories: Institutional Theory of DiMaggio & Powell (1983), and Organizational Culture Theory of Schein (1985). Adaptive Leadership Theory of Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009), emerged as a contemporary leadership concept, evolving from situational, transformational, and complexity theories. The theory claims that leaders must help followers navigate change by addressing challenges that require adaptation. The theory emphasizes the role of leaders as catalysts for change, fostering a culture of innovation and problem-solving within their organizations. Moreover, adaptive leadership is the idea that leaders must identify and address challenges that are both technical and adaptive. Technical challenges are those that can be solved through existing knowledge and procedures, while adaptive challenges require new ways of thinking and behaving.

Adaptive Leadership Theory is a framework that equips leaders to navigate complex and challenging situations by guiding individuals and organizations through adaptation to new realities. The theory emphasizes leaders' roles in creating a sense of urgency, mobilizing individuals to address challenges, and providing necessary support for skill and capacity development. Key principles include identifying adaptive challenges, engaging others in the change process, offering technical assistance, and maintaining focus on the adaptive challenge. Adaptive Leadership is particularly relevant in today's rapidly changing and complex world, enabling leaders to effectively navigate challenges and foster organizational success (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Institutional theory of DiMaggio & Powell (1983) posits that organizations often adopt similar structures and practices in response to external pressures and expectations. These pressures can stem from various sources, including government regulations, industry standards, and societal norms. Conforming to these institutional norms, organizations can gain legitimacy, enhance their reputation, and improve their chances of survival. One of the key concepts within institutional theory is isomorphism, which refers to the process by which organizations become more similar to each other over time. There are three types of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Coercive isomorphism occurs when organizations are pressured to adopt similar practices by powerful external factors, such as governments or industry associations.

Organizational culture theory focuses on how the shared values, beliefs, and assumptions within an organization shape its functioning and overall identity. Schein argues that organizational culture is a pattern of shared basic assumptions that are learned by a group as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration. Over time, these assumptions become taken for granted and are passed down to new members. He identifies three levels of culture: artifacts (visible organizational structures and processes), espoused values (explicitly stated values and norms), and basic underlying assumptions (unconscious, taken-for-

granted beliefs). Schein's theory emphasizes the importance of understanding these cultural layers to foster organizational effectiveness and adapt to changing environments (Schein, 2010).

Section 77, Article 9 of Republic Act 9165, otherwise known as the Comprehensive Dangerous Drug Act of 2002 established the Dangerous Drugs Board (DDB) which shall be the policy-making and strategy-formulating body in the planning and formulation of policies and programs on drug prevention and control. It shall develop and adopt a comprehensive, integrated, unified and balanced national drug abuse prevention and control strategy. It shall be under the Office of the President.

In addition, Section 82 of Republic Act 9165 creates the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) which serves as the implementing arm of the Board, and shall be responsible for the efficient and effective law enforcement of all the provisions on any dangerous drug and/or controlled precursor and essential chemical as provided in this Act.

According to National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM) Resolution No. 2017-317, which reorganized the anti-drug operations of the Philippine National Police (PNP). and dissolved the former PNP Anti-Illegal Drugs Group (PNP-AIDG) creating the PNP Drug Enforcement Group (PNP-DEG) as the new primary unit to lead the national anti-drug campaign within the police force. The reorganization was prompted by various controversies involving the AIDG, including allegations of abuse and misconduct, which undermined public trust in the PNP's anti-drug efforts. As part of this structural change, Drug Enforcement Units (DEUs) were formed under the PNP's territorial units from the regional level down to the municipal level. These localized DEUs were tasked with handling grassroots-level anti-drug operations such as intelligence gathering, surveillance, and buy-bust activities. Embedding the DEUs within territorial police units, the PNP aimed to strengthen its capacity for localized drug enforcement and provide a more efficient and focused response to illegal drug activities in communities. This move also intended to promote greater accountability and professionalism in drug operations while ensuring coordination with lead agencies like the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA).

Executive Order No. 15 (2017), signed by President Rodrigo Duterte on February 23, 2017, reinforced the role of the Philippine National Police (PNP) in the government's war on drugs. This order granted the PNP the authority to conduct drug-related operations, particularly in situations where the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) was unavailable or unable to perform its duties. While PDEA remained the lead agency for drug enforcement, The said executive order allowed the PNP to take over operations when necessary, ensuring a more responsive and flexible approach to the growing issue of illegal drugs in the country. The order emphasized the need for coordination between agencies involved in drug enforcement, particularly between the PNP and PDEA, to maximize the effectiveness of anti-drug efforts.

Furthermore, Executive Order No. 15 underscored the importance of following legal procedures and respecting human rights during these operations. However, the order did face criticisms, especially from human rights groups, who were concerned that it might lead to increased police violence and extrajudicial killings, a key issue in the broader war on drugs. Despite these concerns, the order played a significant role in shaping the PNP's involvement in the drug war, giving the police more operational authority while keeping a system of checks and balances in place with the PDEA as the lead agency.

The organizations are not inherently broken but reflect the desires of their members. Effective leadership involves mobilizing and sustaining people through the challenges of adaptive change rather than imposing change. This requires navigating through periods of disturbance, cultivating both will and skill, and aligning with a meaningful purpose. Clarifying personal values and choosing among competing purposes, leaders can make significant contributions to their organizations and society (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Bolea & Atwater (2009) explained that mastery of leadership is attained through the nine elements model, which is fostered by strong relationships and the cultivation of essential values such as courage, integrity, effective communication, and a future-oriented mindset. A person's aspiration to lead significantly impacts their capacity and potential, while consistent practice is fundamental to becoming a great leader. The Nine Elements Model can be applied not only to professional endeavors but also to personal, social, and community interactions, enhancing leadership skills in all aspects of life.

According to Kotter (2007), successful change initiatives become ingrained in corporate culture when they are clearly demonstrated to benefit the organization. This requires intentional efforts to highlight the positive outcomes of new approaches, behaviors, and attitudes. Effective communication plays a vital role in helping employees understand the connections between change and improved performance. Succession planning is essential for ensuring that the next generation of leaders embodies the new culture, while the involvement of boards of directors can provide valuable guidance and support. Avoiding common pitfalls, organizations can significantly increase the likelihood of successful and sustainable change.

According to Kammersgaard (2019) policing and drug-related harms have focused on how police produce or increase harm, with few studies investigating their engagement in harm reduction. While police are involved in some harm reduction practices like warning users and assisting in overdoses, detailed empirical studies on these practices and their effectiveness in reducing drug-

related harm are limited. Increased cooperation between police and supervised injection facilities and a shift away from prohibitionist approaches in some police forces have been observed. However, changes in police practices often involve refraining from harmful actions rather than actively seeking to reduce harm. This article aims to expand and develop the concept of "harm reduction policing" through an empirical investigation of a local open drug scene in Copenhagen.

Bruke (2022) investigates proactive policing at the organizational level by analyzing drug dealing arrests made by specialized police units in Chicago between 2009 and 2019. Previous research on proactive policing has not focused on the organizational level, despite the evidence that command staff largely direct proactive police work. Specialized police units in Chicago primarily target drug dealing arrests in areas with high levels of drug-related violence. Body cameras have not significantly affected their drug enforcement practices. These findings are positive for command staff, but concerns about racial bias and "de-policing" may necessitate adjustments to strategies and oversight.

According to Reuter & Kleiman (1986) enforcement strategies alone are unlikely to significantly reduce drug consumption. The research primarily focused on federal efforts targeting cocaine and marijuana. The high prices of illicit drugs are largely a result of their illegal status and enforcement actions. Heroin is particularly expensive due to enforcement, costing around \$2,000 per gram. Enforcement efforts against cocaine and marijuana have not been as effective as those against heroin. Recent federal enforcement has not substantially decreased cocaine consumption, and while marijuana prices have increased slightly, changes in attitudes towards its health effects may explain any consumption decline. Most enforcement resources are concentrated in areas that have minimal impact on drug prices. Local enforcement is not expected to significantly improve outcomes for cocaine and marijuana, except for heroin. The analysis used conservative estimates of market size, which may overstate the effectiveness of increased enforcement.

Werb et al. (2011) suggest that increased drug law enforcement interventions are ineffective in reducing drug market violence. Instead, evidence indicates that such efforts contribute to gun violence and high homicide rates. Moreover, sophisticated methods aimed at disrupting drug organizations may inadvertently increase violence. Given the failure of drug prohibition to achieve its stated goals, alternative regulatory models are necessary to substantially reduce drug market violence.

According to Dangani & Tamayo (2017), their study found that the majority of respondents were male, single, aged 26-30, college graduates, and had 1-5 years of experience in drug operations. Cavite Police Provincial Office drug enforcement operatives demonstrated proficiency in surveillance, apprehension, and prosecution. However, they encountered challenges in anti-drug operations within Cavite, with significant differences in capabilities and problems based on their area of assignment. A proposed plan of action aims to enhance the capabilities of anti-drug operatives, which involves the Cavite Police Provincial Office requesting additional funds for anti-drug operations and the PNP leadership conducting community relations activities to encourage community participation. The plan should be implemented and evaluated, and similar research could be conducted using different variables. Furthermore, Lasco (2018) stated that young men actively resist the "war on drugs," employing various tactics to survive. Their perception of the police is shaped by personal experiences and the perceived collusion between police and drug syndicates, leading them to view the police as corrupt and hypocritical. These experiences challenge the effectiveness of fear-based anti-drug campaigns. The study advocates for measures that reframe the relationship between police and young drug users, moving away from hostility and towards trust.

Lim (2021) found out that most PNP personnel adhered to all stages of the project Tokhang implementation, with minimal technical lapses. This resulted in the surrender and arrest of numerous drug personalities. Despite facing challenges, the implementation of project tokhang did not negatively impact the performance of PNP personnel. Moreover, PNP operatives actively sought ways to sustain the program and avoid administrative sanctions. Likewise, Tomaro & Mutiarin (2018) stated that the public participation is crucial in the policy process, and the Anti-Drug campaign should actively involve the community. To understand citizen engagement, the researchers surveyed individuals, particularly university students, about their willingness to participate in specific actions. The results provide insights into the mechanisms of participation that respondents are willing to engage in and the existing avenues for citizen engagement offered by the Philippine National Police.

Aguilar (2022) further stated that the root cause of drug usage is often linked to financial well-being, while societal factors like structure, values, and personality contribute to uncertainty. Poverty, inequality, and powerlessness are prevalent realities that require a holistic and rights-based approach to address the drug problem. Drug offenders face rejection and prejudgment, and law enforcement should establish strong connections with the general public. Drug law enforcement programs for offenders are often neglected, and law enforcement agencies should commit to the justice system's goals. Drug offenders are stigmatized and considered outcasts, with the community's acceptance traits generally being unfavorable and unrewarding, leading to feelings of guilt, inferiority, and hopelessness.

Peer influence is a primary root cause of drug abuse among college and university students. Other significant factors include a lack of attention and love from parents, serious family conflicts or misunderstandings, insufficient guidance from parents, a weak foundation in spiritual and moral values, frustration in love, goals, or desires, the absence of a School Anti-Drug Abuse Council, a

lack of drug abuse prevention activities, and the use of drugs as a means to temporarily escape problems. Additionally, the lack of concern from faculty and staff for student needs and problems contributes to the issue (Cadady, 2017).

The drug problem in the Philippines, characterized by harsh, violent, and punitive approaches, is applicable to other Asian countries. This multi-dimensional problem is deeply rooted in poverty, inequality, and powerlessness. A holistic and rights-based approach, involving all stakeholders, is necessary to address it. We must work together to protect and promote health and well-being in the region (Simbulan et al., 2019).

In addition, Alagabia & Cawi (2019) stated that the barangay officials in Quezon City are aware of the current implementation of the war on drugs, which has proven to be highly efficient and transparent. However, crime rates in NCR from 2014-2018 show no significant decrease during this period. To intensify the campaign against criminality, increased police visibility and helpdesks are necessary, and reported criminal activities should be properly documented for credible data assessment. The drug war cannot be credited as a significant deterrent in decreasing crime volume, indicating a need for additional programs to effectively address crime rates, especially drug-related crimes.

Atun et al. (2019) revealed a likely underreporting of drug-related killings due to the aggressive antidrug campaign launched by the Duterte administration. Despite its focus on drugs, the campaign has garnered global attention for its excessive violence and extrajudicial killings. To address drug dependency and addiction while upholding the rule of law and human rights, critical policy responses are needed in both the short and long term. Immediate policy measures include accountability mechanisms for drug-related enforcement actions and stricter operational policies or reduced police involvement in targeting low-level drug offenders. Introducing monitoring measures to ensure compliance with police antidrug operational rules can help curb violence. Long-term strategies should prioritize health-based approaches, and empirical studies comparing the impacts of enforcement-led actions and health-based interventions are necessary to inform evidence-based policy adjustments. The rising costs to human life and erosion of the rule of law highlight the urgent need for these monitoring tools.

Atun et al. (2019) explained that environmental interventions, like reducing illegal drug availability, and educational efforts to increase awareness about the dangers of illegal drug use are crucial. Drug interventions must be culturally sensitive and well-funded. Shifting from punitive policies to community-based treatment can lead to better health and social outcomes. The younger generation, increasingly involved in illicit drug use, requires stronger preventive measures. Focused drug prevention efforts should target schools, media, communities, and healthcare settings, as youth are critical targets for drug abuse prevention, especially during the young adult stage. The socialization of drug laws can increase youth awareness of the dangers of narcotic abuse.

Experiences of drug enforcement agents in Guihulngan City, address their concerns, identify training needs, and improve drug law enforcement. Social control, expectancy, and routine activity theories were found relevant to understanding the experiences of these agents. Local government units should provide necessary resources to empower drug enforcement units, while the Philippine National Police should conduct comprehensive training for all officers, avoiding selective choices. Directives should be issued at appropriate times to address evolving challenges. Learning from successful global strategies can improve law enforcement efficiency, and reimbursement processes should be expedited to encourage initiative among drug enforcement agents. Communities should collaborate with law enforcement for effective drug enforcement services (Salindo et al., 2024).

Estacio et al. (2021) elaborate on the importance of RA 9165 in addressing the drug problem acknowledged its strengths and weaknesses. The policy recommendations include clarifying definitions, removing the death penalty, utilizing various testing methods, strengthening local government units' roles, increasing budget allocations, establishing a separate drug research institute, improving treatment policies, and revisiting the "war on drugs" approach. Besides, experts agreed that RA 9165 needs updating to address changing environments and advocate for a more balanced implementation of supply and demand reduction provisions. A critical assessment of the prohibitionist policy approach and consideration of alternative approaches like public and behavioral health using social justice principles and evidence-based science approach,

According to Adan et al. (2023), the Philippines' War on Drugs has violated international human rights law, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Extrajudicial killings by Philippine police officers have infringed upon the right to life. As a member of the UN and a signatory to the Rome Statute, the Philippines is bound by international law. International courts like the ICC can intervene if a country fails to protect human rights and impose sanctions on it. Even drug dealers and users have the right to life, fair trial, and rehabilitation, which have been removed by the Philippine government's shootings.

With all the theories and related literature, this research aims to look into the experiences of members of the Philippine National Police - Drug Enforcement Unit (PNP-DEU) in the implementation of the dangerous drugs law. Drug enforcement units are responsible for combating illegal drug activities. As one of the implementors of the dangerous drugs law DEU also investigates drug-related crimes, gathers evidence, and apprehends drug traffickers and dealers. They also work to disrupt drug production,

distribution, and sale networks. DEU often conducts public awareness campaigns to educate the community about the dangers of drug abuse and to encourage them to report illegal drug activities. They may also collaborate with other law enforcement agencies and international organizations to address the global drug problem. In this study, the researcher wanted to explore and understand the work experiences of informants in the implementation of the dangerous drugs law, how the informants address the challenges encountered during the implementation of the dangerous drugs law and what are the aspirations of the informants to improve the performance of their duties.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research method to find out the real-world experiences of the heads of the drug enforcement unit of PNP. It will use transcendental phenomenology.

Transcendental Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl in the early 20th century, is a philosophical method that seeks to study the structures of human experience by focusing on how we perceive and interpret the world. It explores the a priori conditions that make experience and knowledge possible, emphasizing the fundamental structures of consciousness that allow us to experience and assign meaning to objects. Key components of this approach include phenomenology, the study of direct, first-person experience; transcendental investigation, which examines the subjective conditions underlying experience; and the epoché (or phenomenological reduction), a method of suspending assumptions about the external world to focus solely on how things appear in consciousness. Central to Husserl's thought is intentionality, the idea that consciousness is always directed at something, and the transcendental ego, the universal structure that constitutes experience. Additionally, the process of constitution refers to how consciousness actively brings meaning and order to objects and experiences. Husserl's phenomenology has profoundly influenced various fields, including philosophy, psychology, and cognitive science, and has shaped the work of thinkers like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre. Ultimately, transcendental phenomenology aims to reveal the essential conditions that make experience possible, offering a deep understanding of how meaning is constituted within subjective awareness (Husserl, 1999).

Phenomenology is recognized as the appropriate approach to this present study as it focuses on human phenomena and its importance especially to criminology as a field of discipline. As this is a qualitative analysis of narrative data, methods to analyze the data must be quite different from more traditional or quantitative methods of research. Essentially, you are focused on meaning, the meaning of the experience, behavior and narrative (Paley, 2016).

As to Boeije (2016), phenomenology is sometimes considered a philosophical perspective as well as an approach to qualitative methodology. It has a long history in several social research disciplines including psychology, sociology and social work. Phenomenology is a school of thought that emphasizes a focus on people's subjective experiences and interpretations of the world. That is, the phenomenologist wants to understand how the world appears to others. Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. Adding an interpretive dimension to phenomenological research, enabling it to be used as the basis for practical theory, allows it to inform, support or challenge policy and action.

3.2 Research Participants

This research was conducted in Cebu City, Cebu, Philippines, ten key informants were purposively chosen for this study. The (10) informants were individually interviewed (ID). Each represents each police station in Cebu City that is headed by the Philippine National Police Drug Enforcement Unit (DEU), and had their experience in implementation of drug law for at least five years. The informants were asked to share their experiences, their coping mechanisms and the impact of these experiences on their lives and on the organization.

3.3 Research Instrument

In the gathering of data, I employed a self-made-panel- validated interview guide consisting of the following parts: part 1, deals with the experiences of the informants in performance of their duties; part 2, deals the informants challenges encountered in the performance of their duties ,3 the aspirations of the informants to improve the performance of duty. Each of the major questions are followed up with specific questions. I utilized field notes and a voice recorder to document accurately the responses of the informants. In this way, there was no confusion on my part during the transcription of responses of the informants.

The researcher organized the result of the interview, located the informants, made arrangement of the interview, explained the matters of confidentiality, prepared consent forms, made the informant comfortable and selected the right words to open the interview situation.

The researcher focuses attention on the conduct of the interview with the informants. The researcher was tasked to open up so that the interviewee felt comfortable during conversation when needed, follow up questions were given to answer the inquiry but most of the time listened to the statements of the interviewee. Refer to Appendix D for the Interview Guide.

3.4 Data Collection

Before the actual interview, a transmittal letter was sent to the proper authority like Cebu City Police Office (CCPO). I explained the purpose of the study to the informants, inform them of their rights and obligations of the researcher before and after the conduct of the study. The researcher allows the informants to select a comfortable venue where they can be at ease and to get an honest response to the questions. After the in-depth interview of the informants, the transcriptions of the recorded responses were made with English translation.

This research study combines the process of individual interview. Individual interviews are the most widely- used data collection strategy in qualitative research. Researchers typically choose individual interviews to collect detailed accounts of participants' thoughts, attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge pertaining to a given phenomenon. This approach assumes that if questions are formulated correctly, participants' expressions of their experiences will reflect their reality. Thus, individual interviews contribute in-depth data, but the assumption that words are accurate indicators of participants' inner experiences may be problematic. Interviewees may choose to withhold certain descriptions or alternatively, embellish them particularly if the 'truth' is inconsistent with their preferred self-image or if they wish to impress the interviewer. Such considerations raise the issue of whether interviewee-interviewer characteristics (e.g. demographics) should, at times, be matched. Also, although interviewers may wish to adopt a rather neutral role, they may inadvertently demonstrate a preference for a particular perspective and, in the process, bias the findings (Lambert et al., 2008).

3.5 Data Analysis

The data were collected from the informants using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is one of the most common forms of analysis in qualitative research. It emphasizes pinpointing, examining, and recording patterns (or themes) within data. Themes are patterns across data sets that are important to the description of a phenomenon and are associated to a specific research question. The themes become the categories for analysis. Thematic analysis is performed through the process of coding in six phases to create established, meaningful patterns. These phases are: familiarization with data, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

Thematic content analyses were utilized to analyze and cluster interview answers into common themes for interpretation. In this research, a recorded response to interviews was analyzed deductively to obtain discrete, key themes that are relevant and specific to individual categories. The inspection and analysis of the content provided through interview was revealing messages within the content itself. Thematic code analysis was used to inspect themes which emerge during analysis of interviews for the purpose of gauging the frequency of themes and similarities between users in use of themes.

3.6 Ethical Consideration

The study ensured strict ethical standards by safeguarding informants' confidentiality, securing informed consent, and prioritizing beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, risks were clearly communicated, and sensitive topics were handled with empathy, while anonymity, debriefing, and support services were provided. Fair recruitment practices ensured diverse representation, and participants retained full control over their involvement. To establish trustworthiness, the researcher employed rigorous qualitative methods—including extensive literature review, careful question formulation, field observations, and systematic documentation—to ensure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of findings. Bracketing and reflexivity were practiced to minimize researcher bias, particularly given the researcher's limited prior experience, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the authentic experiences of DEU heads.

4. Results and Discussion

The data gathered was thoroughly read to obtain a feeling for the description of the experiences of the informants. Significant statements were extracted from the informants' transcripts about the research phenomena. Formulated meanings were constructed from the significant statements and arranged them into cluster. Cluster themes were then re-grouped and which evolved into emergent themes.

There were two emergent themes for each of the sub- problems of the study. The researcher has created emergent themes out from the common responses of the informants. The following section presents the themes derived from the informants' accounts, encompassing their positive and negative experiences, coping strategies in addressing challenges encountered in the performance of their duties, and their aspirations for improving the enforcement of drug laws.

Analysis revealed eight (8) emergent themes. For the positive experiences of the informants in the performance of their duties, two themes were created: From Unlawful to Upright; and From Shadow to Light. For the negative experiences of the informants in the performance of their duties, two themes were created: A Badge of Honor is A Badge of Terror; and Unseen Forces a Shadow of Horror. In addressing the challenges encountered by the informants in the performance of their duties, themes were created:

Facing Challenges in the Legal Process; and Inter-Agency Cooperation. For the aspirations of the informants to improve the enforcement of drug laws, themes were created namely: Protection for the Guardian; and Sustained Implementation for a Better Future.

4.1.1 From Unlawful to Upright.

This theme pertains to the positive experiences of the informants who, according to them were motivated to work, because they were expecting a change in the lives of the drug users in the future. Further, the researcher came up with this theme since all of my informants were commonly inspired to work hard in their jobs because they can see the improvements in the community, particularly the families of the detained suspects.

4.1.2 From Shadow to Light.

This theme narrates the positive experiences of the informants who stated that when they were very aggressive in anti-drug campaign, they noticed that the lives of the drug pushers and users were change. In this study, Informants revealed a significant transformation of drug personalities transitioning from illegal activities to law-abiding citizenship

4.1.3 A Badge of Honor is A Badge of Terror.

This theme was concerned with the negative experiences of the informants despite their efforts to help the suspected drug sellers and users to change their lives, but some of the parents were not cooperative for the immediate changed of their children. The researcher concluded this theme since the majority of the informants experienced a deep sense of frustration, confusion, and helplessness from the family of the suspect. The parents' denial and subsequent threats, despite their clear awareness and even benefit from their child's illegal actions, underscore a profound breakdown in social responsibility.

4.1.4 Unseen Forces a Shadow of Horror.

This theme narrates the negative experiences of the informants, despite their efforts in catching the drug sellers and users they experience unexpected cancellation of operation. Even if there is an opportunity, they cannot proceed because the instruction is coming from a higher office. I came up with this theme since the majority of my informants commonly experience the unexpected cancellation of operations despite having solid evidence and intelligence to pursue justice, but uncontrollable forces prevent them from doing so. This uncontrollable force is in the form of calls or text messages from the higher command, ordering them to cancel or change the subject of operation.

4.1.5 Facing Challenges in the Legal Process.

This theme narrates the strategies of the informants in addressing the challenges they encountered. The informants would deal with the obstacles, especially the complaints or cases that were filed against them, despite their dedication to fulfilling their duties as government employees. The researcher concluded this theme because it explained that the informants are already aware of, accepted, and faced the complaint files against them, even though they follow legal processes in arresting the suspect, because police officers who are assigned to the drug enforcement unit are frequently subjected to lawsuits or complaints as part of their job.

4.1.6 Inter-Agency Cooperation.

This theme narrates the strategies of the informants in addressing the challenges they encountered. The informants' strategies addressing the challenges were to coordinate with other government agencies, since it allows them to share ideas and strategies in the implementation of drug law. I came up with this theme since informants have been asking other government agencies for help because they believe that collaboration between agencies produces better, more creative solutions, making it a crucial tool for overcoming obstacles. It is simpler to find answers and create more effective approaches to problems when everyone works together.

4.1.7 Protection for the Guardian.

This theme narrates the desires of the informants that there must be permanent legal officers to defend them once they were facing criminal and administrative charges aligned with their duties as police officers. According to the informants, it is a financial burden on their part because they used their own personal money for the services of the lawyers.

4.1.8 Sustained Implementation for a Better Future.

This theme pertains to the personal longings of the informants that the youth are free from illegal drugs for the common good in the future. Their main goal is to lessen the effects of drugs, especially among the youth from the community, considering these individuals are vulnerable to drug addiction because of curiosity and peer pressure.

5. Conclusion

The findings of the study highlight the complex and multifaceted experiences of PNP-DEU heads as they navigate the demands of drug law enforcement. Themes such as From Unlawful to Upright and From Shadow to Light reveal that despite the inherent risks and challenges of their work, officers draw motivation from witnessing genuine transformation among drug users and pushers who shift toward lawful, productive lives. These positive outcomes reinforce their sense of purpose and validate the significance of their role in promoting community safety and rehabilitation.

At the same time, the negative experiences captured in A Badge of Honor is a Badge of Terror and Unseen Forces: A Shadow of Horror underscore the emotional and operational burdens that officers frequently encounter. Resistance from families, threats, bureaucratic interference, and politically driven cancellations of operations contribute to feelings of frustration, helplessness, and moral injury. These challenges not only hinder effective enforcement but also expose officers to personal risk, highlighting the need for institutional reforms that protect and empower frontline personnel.

The study also illustrates the adaptive strategies employed by DEU heads, as reflected in the themes Facing Challenges in the Legal Process and Inter-Agency Cooperation. Despite lawsuits, complaints, and administrative pressures, officers demonstrate resilience by upholding legal protocols, collaborating with partner agencies, and relying on procedural integrity to defend their actions. This collaborative approach is shown to enhance operational effectiveness, promote innovation, and reinforce trust among institutions tasked with implementing the drug law.

Furthermore, the officers' aspirations for a more secure and drug-free future—highlighted in Protection for the Guardian and Sustained Implementation for a Better Future—reveal deep concerns about youth vulnerability and the personal risks carried by drug enforcers. Their call for permanent legal support systems reflects the need for institutional safety nets, while their desire for stronger youth-focused prevention programs affirms their commitment to long-term, community-centered solutions. These aspirations signify a shift from purely punitive approaches toward more holistic and protective interventions.

In summary, the study concludes that the experiences of PNP-DEU heads reflect a balance between hope and hardship, dedication and disillusionment, transformation and systemic barriers. The themes collectively emphasize the need for strengthened moral leadership, enhanced inter-agency collaboration, improved technological and legal support, and expanded rehabilitation and prevention programs. These findings also lay the groundwork for future research on gender dynamics in drug enforcement leadership and the long-term impacts of drug operations on localized drug networks. Ultimately, addressing these insights can help shape a more effective, ethical, and sustainable approach to drug law enforcement in the Philippines.

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