

Behind the Badge: The Challenges and Triumphs of Cebu City's Forensic Investigators

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the experiences of forensic investigators in Cebu City, focusing on their rewarding and challenging encounters, coping methods, and the consequent impacts on their duties. Using a phenomenological approach, the qualitative research involved interviews with ten forensic examiners who had at least five years of experience as police investigators. From their responses, ten emergent themes were identified. Rewarding experiences were categorized into three themes: Happy to be of Service to Others, Justice is Served, and Financial Rewards through Dedicated Services. Conversely, unpleasant experiences were summarized into three themes: Time Constraints on Family, Logistics Concerns, and Occupational Hazards. Coping strategies resulted in two themes: Multitasking is the Key and Exercise Initiative, while the impacts on duty performance were identified as Charting Responsibility by Means of Forging Expertise and Strategic Resilience. The study advocates for implementing support systems within forensic investigation agencies, including resources to manage time constraints, address logistical concerns, enhance resilience, and promote proactive initiatives. These findings offer insights into the diverse experiences of forensic investigators in Cebu City, highlighting the need for better organizational support to facilitate their effective contribution to justice.

Keywords: Criminal Justice, Forensic Investigators, Phenomenological Approach, Cebu City, Philippine

INTRODUCTION

Forensic investigation encompasses a diverse array of scientific methodologies and investigative techniques meticulously applied to analyze evidence and reconstruct events (Saferstein, 2011; Fisher, 2015). It underscores the rigorous standards expected of forensic investigators who navigate numerous technical and procedural challenges in their pursuit of pivotal insights that can influence judicial outcomes. This study integrates foundational contributions from leading figures in forensic science literature, such as Saferstein and Fisher, to provide a contextual framework for understanding the specific challenges encountered by forensic investigators in Cebu City. These challenges are situated within a broader landscape of forensic methodologies and investigative practices, highlighting the complexity and significance of their role in the administration of justice.

Forensic investigation plays a fundamental role in the criminal justice system by furnishing critical evidence that aids in crime resolution and conviction (Osterburg & Ward, 2013). Despite its importance, there remains a significant gap in comprehending the specific challenges and successes faced by forensic investigators in Cebu City, a prominent urban center in the Visayas region of the Philippines. This study endeavors to explore the experiences of forensic investigators in Cebu City, focusing on their rewarding and challenging encounters, coping mechanisms, and the consequent impacts on their professional duties. While existing research has predominantly concentrated on broader law enforcement strategies and crime rates in other Visayan cities, this study offers a focused analysis of the distinctive challenges encountered by forensic professionals in Cebu City. Through in-depth interviews and direct observations, the research gathers firsthand accounts and data from forensic investigators, providing valuable insights into their daily realities and the obstacles they face.

Moreover, this study not only documents the challenges such as limited resources, outdated technology, and bureaucratic constraints but also highlights the successes and innovative practices employed by these investigators. By doing so, it presents a balanced perspective that acknowledges the accomplishments and

resilience of Cebu City's forensic investigators, often overlooked in broader studies. The comprehensive analysis presented in this research aims to influence policy changes and resource allocation decisions, aiming to bolster support systems for forensic investigators. By addressing specific local challenges and drawing on identified successes, the findings of this study can contribute to the advancement of more effective forensic practices, thereby strengthening the criminal justice system in Cebu City and serving as a model for other regions grappling with similar issues.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to explore the experiences of the PNP Forensic Group in handling criminal investigations in Cebu City. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the rewarding experiences of the informants in the performance of their duty?
2. What are the unpleasant experiences of the informants in the performance of their duty?
3. What are their ways in handling or managing the challenges in the performance of their duty?
4. What is the impact of these challenges in the performance of their duty?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research method to explore the lived experiences of the PNP Forensic Group. Phenomenology was chosen for its focus on understanding human phenomena, particularly in the field of criminology (Paley, 2022). This approach allows for a deep exploration of the subjective experiences and perceptions of forensic investigators, aiming to uncover the meaning they attribute to their professional roles and challenges.

The study was conducted at the Regional Forensic Unit 7, located at Doña Modesta Gaisano Street, Sudlon, Lahug, Cebu City. This unit operates in close proximity to the Cebu Police Provincial Office and the National Police Commission Regional Office 7. It comprises forty-one (41) personnel, including doctors, chemists, medical technologists, criminologists, and other technically trained professionals, organized into various specialized sections related to forensic sciences.

To select the research participants, purposive convenient sampling was employed. A total of ten (10) informants from the PNP Forensic Science Group of Region VII were chosen based on specific qualifications and a minimum of five (5) years of service within the forensic unit. The Regional Forensic Unit 7 is the only forensic unit in the entire Region VII, which limited the number of available participants. Thus, only ten qualified personnel were interviewed for this study. These informants represented diverse areas of forensic science expertise, ensuring comprehensive coverage of experiences within the unit.

For data collection, a semi-structured interview guide was utilized. This guide was designed to explore various aspects of the informants' experiences, including the rewarding and challenging aspects of their duties, their coping strategies, and the impacts of challenges on their work. The interviews were conducted in a comfortable and confidential setting, facilitated by the researchers themselves, using a voice recorder to ensure accuracy in data capture. Prior to commencing the interviews, informed consent was obtained from all participants, emphasizing confidentiality and voluntary participation.

After the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to maintain the authenticity of the participants' narratives. A thematic analysis was then conducted, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

1. Familiarization with the data – The researchers read the transcripts repeatedly to gain a deep understanding of the content.
2. Generating initial codes – Significant statements, phrases, and patterns were manually coded line-by-line. Coding was both inductive (emerging from the data) and deductive (based on research questions)
3. Searching for themes – Similar codes were grouped together to form potential themes that reflected

patterns across the dataset.

4. Reviewing themes – The themes were refined and cross-checked against the coded extracts and the full dataset to ensure coherence and internal consistency.
5. Defining and naming themes – Each theme was clearly defined and named based on its core essence, ensuring distinctiveness and relevance to the research objectives.
6. Producing the report – The final themes were described in relation to the research questions, supported by direct quotes from the participants.

To address researcher bias, reflexivity was practiced throughout the process. The researchers maintained reflective journals to bracket personal biases, assumptions, and preconceptions. Peer debriefing and member checking were also employed to ensure credibility and confirm the trustworthiness of the themes. Member checking involved sharing preliminary findings with select participants to validate the accuracy and relevance of interpretations.

Throughout the study, ethical guidelines were strictly adhered to, ensuring the confidentiality of participant identities and obtaining prior consent before data collection. Ethical considerations also included respect for participant autonomy and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

All transcriptions were meticulously reviewed multiple times, and significant statements were extracted to reflect the lived experiences of the informants. To ensure credibility, participant validation (member checking) was conducted by sharing emergent themes with select informants to confirm that interpretations accurately represented their perspectives. While formal inter-coder reliability was not statistically calculated due to the study's phenomenological nature, collaborative coding sessions with peer researchers helped to minimize subjective bias and enhance consistency.

According to Lamar and Hill (2021), individuals engage in relationships and activities based on a cost-benefit analysis, seeking outcomes that maximize rewards and minimize costs. Social identity theory suggests that forensic examiners may find their work rewarding due to the recognition and respect received from peers and society for their contributions (Paley, 2022).

I. Rewarding experience of the informant in the performance of their duty

Happy to Be of Service to Others. Forensic examiners in the PNP Forensic Group derive fulfillment from contributing to community well-being. Their commitment—seen in the meticulous handling of crime scenes and evidence—helps bring justice and closure to victims. Social identity theory (Paley, 2022) explains how recognition by peers and the public enhances motivation. Similarly, job characteristic theory supports that task significance and autonomy increase satisfaction (Saari et al., 2020).

Justice is Served. Forensic examiners view their roles as central to the pursuit of justice, offering accurate, unbiased evidence. The concept of examiners as gatekeepers of justice (Shekhar, 2024) reflects their high-stakes responsibilities. Baechler et al. (2020) emphasize the need for transparency, especially with challenges in evidence interpretation, reinforcing the vital contribution of ethical and scientifically grounded practices.

Financial Rewards through Dedicated Service. Financial incentives and symbolic rewards (medals, certificates) are motivating factors. Incentive theory (Cinar & Bharadiya, 2023) suggests these rewards foster high-quality outputs. Recognition enhances morale (Mousseau et al., 2019), and Kaur et al. (2023) emphasize that even verbal affirmations contribute to overall job satisfaction.

II. Unpleasant experience of informant in the performance of their duty

According to Horan et al. (2020), prolonged exposure to such stressors can lead to various negative outcomes, including burnout, compassion fatigue, and secondary traumatic stress. The Stressor-Strain Model suggests that

the accumulation of stressors in the workplace can result in psychological and emotional strain on the individual.

Time Constraints on Family. Long hours, emergency response duties, and high workloads create strain on family life. Starcher & Stolzenberg (2020) link such demands to burnout risks. The Stressor-Strain Model explains how chronic workplace stress translates to emotional strain. Casino et al. (2022) point out the urgency of forensic response, which can override personal needs, reinforcing the need for balance and institutional support.

Logistics Concern. Lack of equipment, delayed resources, and poor infrastructure hinder effective crime scene management. According to Resource Dependency Theory (Yukama et al., 2020), over-reliance on scarce external resources weakens operational efficiency. Calls for dedicated forensic accreditation units within the PNP (Benter & Cawi, 2021) echo this need.

Occupational Hazards. Examiners work in environments with physical, biological, and chemical risks. Physical Hazard Theory outlines threats like toxic substances or sharp instruments (Arkes & Koehler, 2021). Machado and Granja (2019) note that poor infrastructure and outdated equipment compound these risks.

III. Ways in handling or managing the challenges in the performance of their duty.

While some individuals had positive experiences with their job duties, others faced challenges that made them less sure about their abilities. The lack of staff was a major issue, making it harder for them to handle various tasks. These insights come from personal experiences in their profession.

Multitasking is the Key. Shortage of manpower necessitates multitasking and flexible role-taking. Time Management Theory (Beer & Mulder, 2020) supports multitasking as a time-optimization strategy, although it may come with cognitive trade-offs. Supervision, regular training (Paragas, 2019), and basic resource provision remain critical.

Exercise Initiative. Informants report that court testimony and case resolution rely heavily on their initiative. The Field Training Program (Dalizon, 2023) provides foundational skills, but advanced decision-making and adaptability come from field experience. As Chen et al. (2021) state, modern forensic science demands agility in managing complex data and situations. Inter-agency coordination initiatives by DILG and DOJ also support this adaptive role.

IV. Impacts of these challenges on the performance of their duty

Charting Responsibility by Means of Forging Expertise. It signifies a structured approach to delineate responsibilities, emphasizing the active development and enhancement of specialized skills and knowledge. This initiative aims to create a proficient and organized forensic team, ensuring each member possesses the expertise required for their designated roles, as it enhances its overall effectiveness, contributing to the successful execution of forensic tasks and responsibilities within the law enforcement framework.

Strategic Resilience. This theme was based on the responses of the informants pertains on how they adapt, endure and respond effectively to challenges and uncertainties in the investigative landscape. The ability of forensic investigators to adapt, evolve protocols, and preserve operational continuity amid stressors reflects strategic resilience. Institutions must support innovation and staff well-being to uphold biosafety and investigative integrity simultaneously. This balance can only be achieved with the national government's support, the much-needed promulgation of a law that governs death investigations, careful planning by institutional administrators, technical input from experienced forensic practitioners, and awareness of sound scientific guidelines provided by internationally recognized forensic associations and local academic research institutions (Jose and De Ungria, 2021).

This resilience is crucial for overcoming challenges such as resource constraints and the psychological toll of their work. Effective resource management and innovative practices are essential, as noted by the International Journal of Forensic Science, which highlights the need for maximizing available resources through collaboration

and community support. Additionally, the importance of continuous professional development is emphasized by the National Institute of Justice, which underscores the need for ongoing education to stay current with advancements in forensic science. Support systems for mental health are also vital, as highlighted by the Journal of Forensic Psychology, which examines the psychological impacts of forensic work and the necessity of resilience programs. Lastly, strong institutional support and clear policies, as discussed in Science & Justice, provide the necessary framework for effective forensic investigations. These elements collectively enable forensic investigators to maintain high performance despite facing significant challenges.

Implication for Practice

The inquiry's conclusions have led to the formulation of the following recommendations, suggestions, and actionable steps for implementation.

Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG). The researchers passionately advocate for a significant increase in funding specifically allocated to the PNP Forensic Group, ensuring ample resources to bolster personnel, training initiatives, and essential equipment procurement. Regular performance evaluations and robust feedback mechanisms are imperative to pinpoint areas for enhancement and drive targeted improvements within the Forensic Group. Through collaborative endeavors between the DILG and PNP leadership, they can forge a unified approach to establish standardized policies and procedures. These measures not only enhance efficiency within the Forensic Group but also align seamlessly with broader law enforcement objectives, ultimately reinforcing our commitment to advancing forensic capabilities and ensuring effective crime resolution strategies.

Philippine National Police (PNP). It is paramount to prioritize continuous training initiatives for forensic experts within the PNP Forensic Group, ensuring they are equipped with the latest forensic techniques and technologies. By staying updated, their experts can effectively navigate evolving challenges in criminal investigations, ensuring accurate and timely results. Additionally, advocating for the establishment of a dedicated budget within the overall PNP resources for the Forensic Group is essential. This budget should encompass personnel salaries, comprehensive training programs, equipment procurement, and operational expenses, enabling our forensic experts to perform their duties efficiently. Moreover, strengthening public awareness campaigns is imperative to educate the community about the indispensable role of forensic science in criminal investigations. By highlighting successful forensic investigations conducted by the PNP Forensic Group, they can garner support and trust from the public, fostering collaboration and enhancing overall crime-solving efforts. Together, these initiatives solidify their commitment to excellence in forensic investigation, ensuring justice is served and communities are kept safe.

Philippine National Police Forensic Group (PNP-FG). To drive the PNP Forensic Group towards excellence, it is imperative to implement comprehensive professional development programs tailored for forensic investigators. These initiatives will sharpen their skills and expertise, ensuring thorough and precise investigations. Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous improvement within the Forensic Group is paramount. By promoting knowledge-sharing, collaboration, and innovation among team members, we cultivate an environment where expertise flourishes and best practices emerge. Furthermore, a rigorous review and update of standard operating procedures (SOPs) are essential. Aligning with international best practices will elevate the efficiency and consistency of forensic examinations and investigations, bolstering the ability to deliver accurate results swiftly. Through these concerted efforts, the researcher fortified the Forensic Group's foundation, ensuring it remains at the forefront of forensic science, and solidifying their commitment to uncompromising standards of excellence in law enforcement.

Regional Forensic Unit 7 (RFU 7). To propel the unit to unprecedented levels of effectiveness and efficiency, they must passionately advocate for additional resources. By bolstering the team with more forensic examiners and equipping them with state-of-the-art tools, they can dramatically enhance the capacity to handle a larger caseload and tackle backlog issues head-on, ensuring swift and thorough investigations. Moreover, implementing robust workload management strategies is essential to safeguarding the well-being of their dedicated team members. By distributing tasks evenly and setting realistic expectations, they create a supportive work environment that fosters productivity and prevents burnout. Additionally, forging stronger partnerships

with other law enforcement agencies, particularly in urban areas where challenges are unique, will amplify their effectiveness in solving crimes and upholding justice. With these strategic initiatives, they can demonstrate the unwavering commitment to excellence and ensure that Regional Forensic Unit 7 remains at the forefront of law enforcement innovation and efficiency.

A key limitation of this study is the small sample size, which restricts generalizability. However, as a qualitative phenomenological study, the goal was not breadth but depth of understanding. Future research may benefit from mixed methods approaches to combine rich narratives with quantitative rigor. Also, comparative studies involving other regions in the Philippines—or international forensic groups—would add analytical depth and cross-contextual understanding.

CONCLUSIONS

The study uncovers the dual nature of forensic work, highlighting both the rewarding and challenging aspects faced by investigators. The fulfillment derived from serving the community, ensuring justice, and receiving financial incentives is juxtaposed with significant challenges, such as time constraints on family life, logistical concerns, and occupational hazards. Despite these obstacles, forensic investigators in Cebu City demonstrate strategic resilience, adapting through multitasking, continuous professional development, and exercising initiative. The findings emphasize the necessity for enhanced institutional support, including increased funding, continuous training, and robust logistical frameworks, to improve operational efficiency and the well-being of forensic professionals. This comprehensive approach is crucial for sustaining the effectiveness of criminal investigations and the administration of justice, ultimately benefiting the community and reinforcing the integrity of the criminal justice system.

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