

Exploring the Experiences of Barangay Officials in Handling Libelous Cases a Phenomenological Study

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed to explore the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases. Using an interview guide, the researchers gathered data from 10 barangay officials in Ozamiz City. The study utilized the qualitative research method using the Moustakas data analysis approach to obtain meaningful themes. The findings revealed five themes: encountering financial disputes as triggers for libel cases, navigating the impact of cyber libel and social media platforms, facing challenges during mediation efforts, engaging in the mediation process and its results, and gaining personal and professional growth upon members. The barangay officials shared their insights into how debt disputes often lead to libelous accusations, highlighting the emotional and financial stress involved. They also described the challenges of mediating cases where emotions run high and the need for patience and empathy to ensure fair resolutions. The researchers recommend that barangay officials should undergo regular training on handling libelous cases, including strategies for emotional management and the role of social media in conflicts. The researchers also suggest that barangay officials work closely with community members to promote awareness about respectful communication and the potential consequences of libelous behavior, thereby reducing the frequency of such disputes.

Keywords: Cyber Libel, Financial Dispute, Handling Disputes, Libelous Case

INTRODUCTION

Libelous cases involve publishing false statements that damage an individual's reputation (Davis, 2024). Unlike slander, which pertains to spoken defamation, libel refers to defamatory statements made in a fixed medium, such as written texts, images, or online posts. These cases often require the plaintiff to prove that the statements were false, defamatory, unprivileged, and made with a certain degree of fault by the defendant (Nguyen, 2023). The rise of digital communication platforms has increased the complexity of libel cases, as defamatory content can be widely disseminated and archived, making it challenging to control and mitigate the damage caused (Ladden-Hall, 2024).

In the digital age, libelous cases are more prevalent and damaging due to the vast reach and permanence of online content. Ubiera (2021) studied the fact that social media, blogs, and online forums have become typical venues for libel, where defamatory statements can spread rapidly and remain accessible indefinitely. According to Rabaya (2021), this accessibility and durability might worsen the harm done to the victim's reputation and make getting justice more difficult. Legal frameworks continually adapt to address these challenges, balancing protecting individuals' reputations with the right to freedom of expression (Olding, 2022). The evolving nature of digital communication necessitates a nuanced understanding of libel laws to effectively handle and resolve such cases in today's interconnected world.

Barangay Officials play a crucial role in local governance in the Philippines, serving as the frontline authorities in their communities. Their responsibilities include maintaining peace and order, implementing local policies, and addressing various community issues and disputes (Cereneo et al., 2021). When handling disputes, Barangay Officials act as mediators and facilitators, providing a forum for parties to discuss their problems and seek amicable resolutions. Silueta (2020) added that this process often involves the Barangay Captain and the

Lupon Tagapamayapa, a committee tasked with resolving conflicts through conciliation and arbitration. Moreover, Distrito (2024) states that the main objective is to resolve conflicts within the community without taking them to court, which will promote social unity and lessen the load on the legal system.

Barangay officials follow a structured approach to mediation and resolution when handling libelous cases. Following receipt of a complaint, the authorities call the parties to a hearing where they enable a discussion to ascertain the nature and consequences of the libelous utterances (Libo-on, 2020). The officials encourage both sides to present their grievances and defenses in a controlled and respectful environment. Santiago et al. (2021) assessed that the aim is to reach a mutual agreement that may include a public apology, retraction of defamatory statements, or other forms of restitution deemed appropriate by the parties. Metillo et al. (2022) assessed that this process helps mitigate the harm caused by libel and restores relationships within the community, reflecting the restorative justice principles that guide much of the Barangay's conflict resolution practices. Through these efforts, Barangay Officials play a pivotal role in maintaining community cohesion and upholding local justice.

Barangay Officials in the Philippines face significant challenges when handling libelous cases, often involving defamatory statements spread via social media. They must balance community relationships, legal principles, and digital literacy (Rodil et al., 2021). The quick spread of libelous content makes their attempts to manage narratives and lessen harm more difficult, calling for a tactful approach to conflict resolution that prioritizes communication and mediation (Dagohoy, 2021).

In Misamis Occidental, the close-knit nature of communities makes libel cases particularly challenging as they can escalate into broader social conflicts (Jimenez & Ballesteros-Lintao, 2020). Barangay Officials here employ strategies such as community dialogues, promoting digital literacy, and using traditional and modern dispute resolution methods to address these issues (Guia & Mangubat, 2021). These adaptive and culturally sensitive approaches are crucial for maintaining community harmony and ensuring justice. With this background at hand, the researchers ventured to investigate the experiences of Barangay Officials in handling libelous cases. While previous studies have explored general conflict resolution practices at the Barangay level, there needs to be more understanding of how officials manage cases involving online defamation and their experiences towards it, which presents unique complexities.

This study aimed to fill this gap by examining the specific approaches, difficulties, and impacts of handling libelous cases within barangays, particularly in Ozamiz City. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing effective training programs, policies, and support systems that can enhance the capabilities of barangay officials in managing such disputes. This research is essential as it addresses the evolving nature of community conflicts in the digital era, ensuring that local governance structures are equipped to maintain social harmony and uphold justice in an increasingly connected world.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study used a phenomenological research design to explore the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases in Ozamiz City, Philippines. Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence of a phenomenon by exploring individuals' feelings, perceptions, and beliefs. The research focused on uncovering the challenges and ethical dilemmas faced by barangay officials in addressing libel cases. Participants were selected through purposive sampling, and interviews were conducted to gather in-depth insights. The study adhered to strict ethical guidelines, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participant well-being. The researchers used Moustakas' phenomenological data analysis method, which involved steps like bracketing, horizontalization, and clustering to identify themes and synthesize the participants' experiences into a cohesive narrative.

The data collected from the interviews were analyzed using NVivo software, which helped generate the study's final themes. Moustakas' approach guided the analysis, allowing for the reduction of experiences into key themes and the integration of both textural and structural descriptions. The research aimed to provide a deep understanding of the ethical challenges faced by barangay officials in handling libel cases and to offer a synthesis of the shared experiences of the participants. This phenomenological analysis helped to reveal the

essence of the phenomenon under investigation and contributed valuable insights into the complexities of managing libel in local governance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

A total of ten (10) barangay officials participated in the study through a face-to-face interview. The participants, aged between 54 and 70 years old, were from three barangays: Baybay San Roque, Malaubang, and Bacolod. Most participants had extensive experience, with six serving for 30 years, while four had between 2-7 years of service. They included five males and five females, with roles such as Barangay Captain, Lupon Secretary, and Lupon members. These participants brought a wealth of knowledge and diverse perspectives in handling libelous cases, reflecting their commitment to community mediation and conflict resolution.

Profile of Participants

The participant's profiles were collected based on their age, gender, position, and years in service. The data below shows the profiles of the ten participants, given with their respective code names.

Table 1. Participants' Profile

Code Name	Age	Gender	Position	Years in service
P1	65	Female	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	30
P2	65	Male	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	30
P3	65	Male	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	30
P4	70	Male	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	30
P5	65	Female	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	3
P6	66	Female	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	2
P7	54	Female	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	2
P8	64	Male	Lupon Tagapamayapa Member	6
P9	62	Female	Lupon Secretary	6
P10	55	Male	Barangay Captain / Head of Lupon	7

Further, based on the responses of the participants of the study, there were five (5) themes identified: (1) Encountering Financial Disputes as Triggers for Libel Cases, (2) Navigating the Impact of Cyber Libel and Social Media Platforms, (3) Facing Challenges During Mediation Efforts, (4) Engaging in the Mediation Process and its Results, and (5) Gaining Personal and Professional Growth as Lupon Members.

Encountering Financial Disputes as Triggers for Libel Cases

This theme shows that one of the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases is debt as the root cause of libelous disputes. Libelous cases predominantly stem from debt-related conflicts, often escalating into accusations of financial misconduct, defamation, and gossip, including cyber libel via social media. Debt often serves as the root cause of libelous disputes, as financial disagreements can escalate into accusations, gossip, and defamation. Resolving such disputes requires addressing both the financial and personal aspects of the conflict, emphasizing open communication, empathy, and sometimes community resources like financial counseling to prevent recurrence.

The following are the statements given by the participants:

"Common issues in libelous cases are related to debt, and it often involves accusations of non-payment, slanderous remarks about a debtor's financial responsibility, and spreading of rumors about their creditworthiness." (P1)

"My experience as a Lupon Tagapamayapa has shown me how easily debt disputes can turn into libelous situations" (P2)

"The most common issues in libelous cases related to debt are statements about unpaid loans, defamatory remarks to debtors, and spreading of rumors about their ability to repay, and it always often ends up being posted on social media." (P4)

"The most common issues in libelous cases here are about false accusations like defamation of character by spreading of rumors being pregnant and above all about debt that later on debt disputes escalated into libelous accusations." (P5)

"The most common issues in libelous cases are small misunderstandings that became big due to spreading of rumors that damage someone's reputation, and debt that turns to defamation of character." (P7)

"Debt-related disputes are common. I have seen cases where neighbours have fallen into debt with each other, often due to misunderstandings or disagreements about the terms of the loan." (P8)

"As to what we have handled here, it is often about money lending issues often lead to misunderstandings and disagreements." (P10)

Addressing debt-related libel disputes requires a balanced approach that considers both the financial and emotional aspects of the conflict (Balbada & Suasba-Balbada, 2023). Misunderstandings over loans or unpaid debts often lead to feelings of mistrust, frustration, and resentment, which can escalate into damaging accusations. By fostering open communication and encouraging compromise, mediators help parties understand each other's perspectives and work toward fair resolutions (Pawilen, 2020). Strengthening financial literacy and providing access to community support services can also empower individuals to manage their financial responsibilities better and prevent similar disputes in the future.

Participants mostly reported that debt is a significant factor in the escalation of libelous disputes within the community. Many cases arise from misunderstandings or disagreements about financial transactions, such as accusations of non-payment or slanderous remarks regarding a debtor's financial responsibility. Guia and Mangubat (2021) mentioned that these disputes often lead to defamatory actions, including the spreading of rumors about a person's creditworthiness or character. Several participants highlighted how easily debt-related issues could spiral into libelous accusations, especially when emotions run high or pride prevents resolution. Money lending and informal financial agreements were commonly cited as triggers for these conflicts, with unresolved financial matters frequently contributing to strained relationships and reputational harm (Avenido & Tabucanon, 2020).

The first identified theme implies that barangay officials, who recognize debt as the root cause of libelous disputes, are often tasked with addressing complex situations that intertwine financial disagreements with reputational damage. These officials acknowledge that misunderstandings and non-payment issues frequently lead to defamatory statements, either through gossip or online platforms, escalating conflicts. Their role involves mediating between parties, managing heightened emotions, and encouraging resolutions that address both the financial and emotional aspects of the disputes. It features the importance of their ability to foster dialogue, patience, and impartiality in resolving cases effectively while maintaining harmony within the community.

Navigating the Impact of Cyber Libel and Social Media Platforms

This theme shows that one of the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases is the role of cyber libel and social media. The emergence of cyber libel has complicated cases, with defamatory remarks and misinformation frequently being spread through online platforms. This online behavior, known as cyber

libel, can significantly intensify conflicts, as the public nature of social media posts makes it difficult to contain the damage. Unlike traditional forms of libel, cyber libel allows defamatory content to be shared instantly and persistently, often remaining accessible long after the initial dispute.

The following are the statements given by the participants:

"Often involving cyber libel and the spread of misinformation online." (P1)

"This often leads to cyber libel through social media posts or online comments." (P2)

"It always often ends up being posted on social media." (P4)

"Money lending situations often lead to misunderstandings and disagreements, which can escalate into accusations and gossip within the community, and it is sometimes being posted on social media too." (P9)

Cyber libel and social media play a crucial role in the escalation of libelous disputes, particularly in cases involving debt (Atanacio & Amparo, 2024). The widespread use of social media platforms has made it easier for defamatory statements to spread rapidly and reach a wide audience, often causing irreparable harm to an individual's reputation. In debt-related disputes, parties may resort to online platforms to share false accusations, sometimes exaggerating or distorting the facts to damage the debtor's image (Guia & Mangubat, 2021). As a result, mediators in libelous cases must address not only the immediate personal conflict but also the broader public impact of these online actions, requiring solutions that mitigate both the personal and digital fallout.

Participants mostly reported that cyber libel and the spread of misinformation online were common elements in libelous cases. Many of the disputes, especially those related to debt, often escalated when parties involved took their grievances to social media. It included spreading false information or making defamatory comments that damaged reputations (Añana et al., 2024). In some instances, the issues were primarily confined to personal interactions, but they frequently ended up being posted on social media, which amplified the conflict and made it more difficult to resolve. The participants highlighted that these online actions exacerbated the emotional intensity of the disputes, making it challenging for barangay officials to mediate effectively.

The third identified theme implies that barangay officials often consider the role of cyber libel and social media in escalating libelous disputes. These can amplify the spread of false accusations and make it more challenging to resolve conflicts through traditional mediation methods. Despite the widespread impact of online platforms, these officials sometimes focus primarily on face-to-face negotiations and overlook the digital dimension, which often prolongs or intensifies the dispute due to the public nature of cyber libel.

Facing Challenges During Mediation Efforts

This theme shows that one of the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases is the challenges in mediation and evidence gathering. Challenges in the mediation of libelous cases refer to the various obstacles and complexities that arise when attempting to resolve disputes that involve defamatory statements. These cases often center on issues such as false accusations, reputational harm, and emotional reactions, which can significantly complicate the mediation process. Difficulties include managing heightened emotions, verifying false accusations, and mediating between parties unwilling to compromise or acknowledge responsibility.

The following are the statements given by the participants:

"Challenges include gathering evidence of false accusations, mediating between parties with strong emotions, and ensuring a fair resolution that protects both debtors and creditors." (P1)

"The challenges in handling libelous cases are mostly about the managing of emotions between the parties, and finding a resolution that addresses both the financial and reputational damage" (P2)

"The most challenging part of every case is mediating between parties with conflicting interests and ensuring a fair outcome that protects both parties' well-being." (P3)

"I think it is about dealing with emotional outbursts and anger from the parties involved that makes them not want to agree." (P5)

"It can be challenging to convince the parties involved to accept responsibility for their actions and compromise because of their strong emotions at the moment." (P6)

"One of the biggest challenges is convincing the parties involved to cooperate and reach a peaceful resolution and their range of emotions." (P7)

"One of the biggest challenges in handling debt cases is proving the validity of the debt." (P8)

In many instances, the accused party may deny the allegations or refuse to acknowledge the harm caused, making it difficult to negotiate a fair resolution (Roxas, 2020). Mediators must navigate the fine line between addressing the financial impact, such as unpaid debts or economic losses, and the emotional toll, which includes damage to personal or professional reputations. This dual aspect of the dispute often requires creative solutions, such as offering compensation, public retractions, or apologies, which may not always be satisfactory to both parties (Aquino, 2022). Furthermore, the involvement of online platforms in spreading defamatory statements, such as through social media, can further complicate the mediation process, as the damage may extend beyond personal interactions and into public spheres (Verdad, 2024). Mediators must, therefore, consider these broader implications and work towards solutions that address both the immediate issues and the long-term consequences of the libelous acts.

Participants mostly reported that handling libelous cases presents several challenges, particularly in managing the emotionally changing aspects between the parties involved. Many highlighted the difficulty of mediating between individuals with conflicting interests, where strong emotions, such as anger and pride, often hinder the parties from reaching an agreement. These emotional outbursts can complicate the mediation process, as individuals may be unwilling to cooperate or acknowledge responsibility for their actions (Warguez et al., 2023). Moreover, the participants noted that the need to address both the financial and reputational damage adds another layer of complexity, requiring mediators to ensure a fair resolution that protects both debtors and creditors.

The second identified theme implies that barangay officials experienced different challenges in mediation. Without clear evidence, mediators face the challenge of balancing the perspectives of both parties, ensuring that each feels heard while attempting to protect their reputations and interests. It requires skillful negotiation and the ability to manage the legal and emotional aspects of the dispute, all while striving to find a resolution that is mutually agreeable and just. As a result, mediators must not only address the factual and legal aspects of the case but also work to defuse heightened emotions to foster a conducive environment for resolution.

Engaging in the Mediation Process and Its Results

This theme shows that one of the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases is the mediation process and its outcomes. The mediation process in libelous cases often involves facilitating a dialogue between the disputing parties to find a mutually acceptable resolution. Barangay officials play a crucial role in guiding both sides through the process, ensuring that all concerns are heard and addressing both the financial and reputational aspects of the dispute. Successful mediation often involves apologies, retractions, or compromises, while unresolved cases frequently proceed to court due to emotional resistance or the complexity of disputes.

The following are the statements given by the participants:

"The outcomes varied. Some cases were resolved through mediation, with apologies and retractions. Others were settled with agreements for compensation." (P1)

"Most of the cases I have handled often the parties were willing to settle through apologies and retractions, especially when the libelous statements were made impulsively." (P2)

"If the parties involved will not come up to an agreement, we will give them 15 days for them to reflect and think about their decision because our goal is to ensure that the resolution is fair and equitable for all involved." (P3)

"Some parties expressed regret over their actions and agreed to make amends, while others chose to maintain their stance, leading to more formal proceedings." (P6)

"Outcomes depended heavily on the willingness of the parties to communicate openly" (P7)

"However, if they fail to reach an agreement, we issue a certificate for them to file a formal case in court." (P9)

The mediation process aims to create a safe and neutral environment where both parties can express their grievances and work toward a resolution (Laguda, 2024). In libelous cases, especially those involving debt, the mediator focuses on addressing the emotional and reputational harm caused by the false accusations. Through active listening, empathy, and a structured approach, barangay officials guide the parties toward understanding each other's perspectives (Araña et al., 2023). Successful outcomes often involve compromises, such as financial settlements, public apologies, or retractions of defamatory statements. While many disputes are resolved at the barangay level, some cases remain unresolved, particularly when one party refuses to cooperate or when the damage is too severe to reconcile (Verdad, 2024). Ultimately, the mediation process seeks to preserve community relationships and promote reconciliation while protecting the interests of both parties involved.

Participants mostly reported that the outcomes of mediation varied depending on the willingness of the parties involved. Some cases were successfully resolved through mediation, with apologies, retractions, and even compensation agreements. In many instances, parties were willing to settle by acknowledging their actions and offering amends, particularly when the libelous statements were made impulsively. However, in cases where the parties could not reach an agreement, barangay officials provided 15 days for reflection, encouraging the parties to reconsider their decisions and ensure a fair resolution. If no resolution is reached after this time, a certificate will be issued, allowing the case to proceed to court. The outcomes often depended on how open and cooperative the parties were in communicating with one another (Villamor & Dagohoy, 2020).

The fourth identified theme implies that barangay officials carefully consider the mediation process and its possible outcomes before suggesting a better solution. They assess the dynamics of each case, considering the willingness of the parties to cooperate and the potential for reconciliation. By understanding the complexities of the dispute, they can recommend fair and equitable resolutions, whether through direct mediation, apology, retraction, or other forms of settlement. This thoughtful approach ensures that both parties' needs are addressed and increases the likelihood of a peaceful resolution.

Gaining Personal and Professional Growth as Lupon Members

This theme shows that one of the experiences of barangay officials in handling libelous cases is the personal and professional growth of lupon members. Handling libelous cases has taught patience, empathy, and the importance of neutrality, with members using tailored approaches and fostering dialogue to resolve conflicts effectively. As Lupon members continue to mediate various cases, they grow not only in their professional competence but also in their capacity to empathize with diverse viewpoints, promoting a more inclusive and compassionate approach to conflict resolution.

The following are the statements given by the participants:

"My experiences have taught me the importance of patience, empathy, and active listening." (P1)

"I have learned that libelous cases can be incredibly emotionally charged. It is important to remain neutral and avoid taking sides." (P2)

"I have learned that it is crucial to understand the context of each case and the specific needs of the parties involved." (P4)

"I have learned to be patient and understanding when dealing with parties involved in libelous cases." (P5)

"My experiences have taught me the importance of understanding the underlying dynamics of each case." (P8)

"I have learned that patience and empathy are crucial in these situations." (P9)

The personal and professional growth of Lupon members is significantly shaped by their experiences in handling various cases within the barangay (Pagalilauan, 2023). Through mediation and conflict resolution, Lupon members develop essential skills such as empathy, patience, and active listening, which enhance their ability to manage emotional situations and negotiate compromises effectively (Sotto, 2021). Their role also requires them to uphold ethical standards, which strengthens their sense of responsibility and integrity. As they gain more experience, they become better equipped to handle complex disputes, improve their communication skills, and foster a deeper understanding of community dynamics (Pajimola & Salom, 2020). This growth not only enriches their professional capabilities but also positively impacts their personal development as they become more adept at balancing emotions, resolving conflicts, and ensuring fairness in their decisions.

Participants mostly reported that their experiences have emphasized the importance of patience, empathy, and active listening when handling libelous cases. Many highlighted the need to remain neutral and avoid taking sides, especially in emotionally charged situations. Understanding the context of each case and the specific needs of the parties involved was seen as crucial in effectively resolving disputes (Noveloso et al., 2024). Several participants noted that they had developed a deeper appreciation for the underlying dynamics of each case, which required not only patience but also a willingness to empathize with the concerns of all parties. This understanding helped them approach the mediation process with greater sensitivity and a focus on achieving fair outcomes for everyone involved.

The fifth identified theme implies that barangay officials experience personal and professional growth as they repeatedly handle disputes. Through their work in mediating libelous cases, they develop crucial skills such as patience, empathy, and active listening. This exposure allows them to refine their conflict management abilities, stay neutral, and better understand each case's dynamics. Over time, they become more competent in resolving disputes and gain emotional resilience, which strengthens their ability to guide parties toward peaceful resolutions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study concludes that the mediation of libelous cases in barangays is a complex process that involves addressing both the emotional and legal aspects of the dispute. Based on the results of this study, it is observed that while most cases are resolved through open dialogue, there are challenges such as strong emotions, unwillingness to cooperate, and the influence of social media that complicate the mediation process. It implies that barangay officials must develop a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of each case, balance the need for justice with the goal of reconciliation, and remain impartial and empathetic to ensure effective resolution. Additionally, more emphasis should be placed on the role of social media and cyber libel in modern disputes, highlighting the need for continuous adaptation in the mediation approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of the study, the researchers recommend that barangay officials undergo regular training on conflict resolution, particularly in handling libelous cases and understanding the influence of social media. It will help enhance their mediation skills, improve their impartiality, and better manage the emotional aspects of disputes. The families of the barangay officials should support and encourage their participation in these training programs, as their involvement can contribute to a more stable and effective environment for the officials. The community may also benefit from awareness campaigns that promote respectful communication and understanding, reducing the likelihood of misunderstandings that can escalate into libelous accusations. Additionally, strengthening community resources for conflict resolution, such as counseling or financial literacy programs, can help address the root causes of debt-related disputes.

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