Lived Experience of the Activists of Barzani Genocide: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract
Background and objective: Barzani genocide that occurred in 1983 led to death of 8,000 Barzani men. Since then, there have been numerous attempts by different activists to archive the events, make the crisis know worldwide, and help the survivors. The present study was a qualitative investigation into the Barzani genocide activists lived experience in order to come up with deeper understanding of their attempts and probable future measures to help survivors overcome their sorrow and finally prevent similar crises from happening in the future.

Method: Using a hermeneutic phenomenological method through Van Manen’s method, the transcripts of in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine activists of Barzani genocide were analyzed. The interviews were carried out at the activists’ home.

Results: Analyzing the interviews led to emergence of three main themes which were “Attempting to introduce Barzani genocide to international community”, “Archiving the event”, and “Alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief”.

Conclusion: According to the results of the present study, the activists’ attempts have been successful in introducing Barzani genocide worldwide, archiving the events involved with and leading to the crisis, and alleviating the survivors’ grief.

Keywords: Genocide; Barzani Kurds; Activists of Barzani genocide; Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Lived experience; Phenomenological study.

Introduction
On July 30th, 1983, as a part of the Anfal Campaign against the Kurds, Baath Regime abducted 8,000 Barzani men who were 14 years old and more and transferred them to southern Iraq.¹ ² Later, it was officially announced by Saddam Hussein that they were “taken hell” and got “their punishment” shot in a desert in southern Iraq.³ Known as Barzani genocide, this crisis was one of the consequences of the Algiers Agreement of 1975 among Iraq, Iran, and Turkey that intended to establish a security belt within 10 to 20 km from the borderlines and transfer all of the population living around that region.⁴

Before the fall of the Baath regime, most of the documents available on Kurdish issues including Barzani genocide were collected and sent to the United States by the PUK and KDP. Those documents were mainly related to the Anfal Campaign.⁵ After the regime’s fall in 2003, human rights investigators, the US military, and other Iraqi parties could have easier access to Iraq; however, numerous concerns have been reported that some invaluable evidence was lost during the chaos following the collapse of the regime.⁶ Since then, there have been numerous attempts by Human Rights Watch, US government teams, and freelance journalists to find and collect reliable evidence on Barzani genocide.⁷ ⁸

In every humanitarian crisis, activists including journalists, writers, and newspaper, TV, and radio reports can play a highly significant role before, during, and after the event. In this regard, it has been stated that broadcasting and publicizing the true lines leading to a crisis can result in a remarkable reduction in scope of the crisis during it and prevention of similar events in the future.⁹

To the best knowledge of the authors, the issues of the Barzani genocide has never been studied through the lived experiences of genocide activists. In this regard and in an attempt to depict the
activities of genocide activists in Kurdistan regarding the Anfal particularly Barzani genocide, the present qualitative study was carried out in order to analyze the attempts of activists of Barzani genocide through their lived experiences.

**Method**

**Study design**

The present investigation was a qualitative study that was carried out using Van Manen’s (1990) hermeneutic phenomenological method.\(^\text{10}\)

**Participants**

The study was participated by 9 activists of Barzani genocide. The study sample was selected using convenience sampling method. The inclusion criteria were being a Barzani genocide activist, willingness to take part in the study, and having experience of collecting or and documenting evidence on Barzani genocide, and the exclusion criteria included lack of willingness to take part in the study and lack of experience of collecting information and evidence on the genocide. The activists were all males with an age range of 28-45. They were all Kurds who lived in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

**Data collection**

The required data on the participants’ lived experiences were gathered via in-depth semi-structured interviews with the activists of Barzani genocide during June to August, 2018. The participants were asked to select the place of interview, so they felt comfortable and gave as much information as they could. Accordingly, the interviews were carried out in their homes. Until data saturation was obtained and no new concepts appeared, data collection was continued. The interviews were begun by asking general questions such as, “What happened during Barzani genocide?”, “When did Barzani genocide happen?”, or “How did Barzani genocide happen?” and continued by posing questions like “What attempts have you made regarding documenting the events involved with Barzani genocide?” or “How has been your experience as a Barzani genocide activist throughout all these years?”. Sufficient time was given to each activist, so they could express all their lived experiences with as many details as possible. Each interview lasted for about 60 to 90 minutes. Following the activists’ permission, all of the interviews were recorded, and then transcribed and translated for further analysis.

**Data analysis**

The six methodological activities proposed by Van Manen (1990)\(^\text{10}\) were utilized to analyze the collected data (See Table 1).

**Table 1:** Six methodological activities in Van Manen’s method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Van Manen’s Methodical Activities</th>
<th>The Researchers’ Activities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Turning to the nature of lived experience</td>
<td>The correspondence author is a genocide survivor who lost his father on 31 July, 1983, 4 paternal uncles, 2 maternal uncles, and 68 relatives in Barzani genocide when he was only 1 year and 7 months old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Investigating experience as we live it</td>
<td>Selecting the participants who have activists with Barzani genocide</td>
</tr>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon</td>
<td>Using thematic analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and re-writing</td>
<td>Writing and rewriting to create a phenomenological text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Maintaining a strong and oriented relation to phenomenon</td>
<td>Discussing the themes in relation to phenomena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole</td>
<td>Moving between transcripts and themes in relation of Barzani activists genocide</td>
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In so doing, the recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcriptions and the recorded interviews were compared to make sure about their accuracy. Afterwards, they were translated into English by an experienced translator. After that, by breaking down the interviews into words, phrases, and sentences using detailed, holistic, selective approaches, the themes (units of meaning) depicting Barzani genocide activists’ lived experiences were extracted. The transcriptions were reread and scrutinized several times so as to understand the activists’ experiences thoroughly.

**Trustworthiness**

In qualitative studies, trustworthiness is defined as the level of adequacy or soundness. To ensure trustworthiness of a qualitative study, describing the data analysis procedure and justifying the reliability of the results are essential. In the present study, trustworthiness was ensured by benefiting from the complementary comments of the field experts, constructing a good relationship with the activists and obtaining their trust, carrying out the interviews at proper times and places, and reviewing the transcripts for several times. Moreover, the researcher’s father, 2 maternal uncles, and 68 relatives were Barzani genocide victims; therefore, he has lived all his life within the same context and has enough experience, which adds to the trustworthiness of the study and reliability of the collected data.

**Ethical considerations**

In order to observe the ethical considerations, the present study was ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of College of Nursing, Hawler Medical University (project No. 49, approval date: 48 June 2018). Moreover, the participants were provided with thorough explanation about the study’s objectives, data collection method, and confidentiality of their information. In addition they had the right and freedom to quit the study whenever they wanted to. Furthermore, the participants filled up and signed the informed consent forms and permitted the researchers to record the interviews. In order to keep the collected data anonymous, each participant was given a unique code (Activist 1, Activist 2, etc.), and by keeping the files containing the collected data in a safe place, the confidentiality of the data was ensured.

**Results**

Analyzing the transcripts of the interviews led to emergence of the following themes (1) Attempting to introduce Barzani genocide to international community, (2) Archiving the event, and (3) Alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief.

**Theme 1: Attempting to introduce Barzani genocide to the international community**

According to the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews with the participating activists of Barzani genocide, writers, researchers, and documentary directors have made enormous attempts to introduce Barzani genocide to the international community. In this regard, Activist 3 stated:

“We have built the Barzani Museum in the Barzani Graveyard in order to introduce the Barzani genocide to the global community. The museum familiarize the visitors with the crisis through pictures, books, brochures, and so forth. There are also some guides that help the visitors become more familiarized with the Barzani genocide.”

He continued:

“I have tried to run some exhibitions all over the world in order to introduce the Barzani genocide to the globe. An exhibition was held in Poland where I could familiarize the visitors with the crisis through books, journals, and brochures.”

He added:

“I have published a book on genocide of the Kurds in general, which particularly focuses on the Barzani genocide. This book is taught in secondary high schools.”

He also said:

“To introduce the crisis of Barzani genocide to both local and global communities, we have broadcasted some presentations on TV.”

He further explained:
“To raise the global awareness about the significance of Barzani genocide, we have written and published numerous books on the issue of Kurdish genocide. Some of these books are “Barzani genocide”, “The history of Kurdish genocide”, “Anfal and its psychological effects”, “Anfal and Kurdish genocide from the perspective of foreigners”, and so forth.”

With regard to the first theme, Activist 4 revealed:
“I have produced 3 short films about the Kurdish genocide. We have also held 8 documentary exhibitions in different cities such as Basra, Hawler, Slemani, and Soran.”

Moreover, Activist 5 stated:
“Scientific investigation into the Kurdish genocide based on the recorded evidence has played a significant role in familiarizing the Barzani genocide to both local and global communities. In this regard, I have written and published 3 research studies which were also presented in some special conferences on the Kurdish genocide.”

Theme 2: Archiving the event
According to the data analysis, there have been enormous endeavors to archive the accurate events involved with the Kurdish genocide. These attempts include making documentary films, and collecting documents and evidence by different organizations and individuals. Regarding this theme, Activist 1 said:
“As a genocide activist and a journalist, I have conducted numerous interviews with numerous local people and political characters and have written several news articles on the issue of genocide in Kurdistan especially the Barzani gendercide.”

Moreover, Activist 3 said:
“I have collected a large body of evidence on the Barzani genocide and held a home museum on this issue. I have also published a report on my home museum.”

Also, Activist 5 stated:
“We have written and directed some short documentary films such as “The Pilot” on Barzani genocide for Kurdistan TV, “We were genocide victims in the sky” for documentary section of Rudaw TV, and “Bahrka, from village to town”. We also won an award “The Pilot” as the best film in Slemani”

In addition, Activist 6 revealed:
“I have collected thousands of photo documents and events on the Kurdish genocide, Russian women, and Kurdish migration, and the archive is quite large and includes thousands of photos and evidence, ten audio cassettes, and eight video cassettes”

In the same regard, Activist 8 related:
“Unfortunately there are very few academicians and experts in this regard, as a result, preserving the documents related to this humanitarian crisis should be a part of the plan that needs to be sketched out.”

Theme 3: Alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief
Allocating a special budget to help the survivors was also referred by the participants as a good strategy to help alleviate their deep grief. In this regard, Activist 1 said, “To relieve the deep sorrow of the genocide survivors, we need to adopt appropriate measures.” Also, Activist 7 stated:
“Helping the survivors of such national events is one of the most significant steps that the government needs to take seriously because this step will lead to formation of national trust and unity and strengthen the community. It also alleviates the survivors’ deep grief.”

Moreover, Activist 9 said:
“Genocide is a legal issue; therefore, it should be one of the major points in the work plans of the government. In this regard, special budget and professional diplomats and personnel need to be assigned, and short- and long-term plans need to be sketched out in order to alleviate the survivors’ sorrow. Also, local NGOs and civil societies need to
establish collaborative connections with global NGOs especially those located in Europe that has experienced two world wars and similar events and use such experiences and measures to help the crisis survivors.”

Discussion
According to the results of the present study, the Barzani genocide activists’ lived experiences were interpreted as three main themes namely, “Attempting to introduce Barzani genocide to international community”, “Archiving the event”, and “Alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief”. However, since there are no similar studies on the issue of Barzani genocide based on the lived experiences of the activists, the results of the present study and the elicited themes cannot be compared to any previous investigations. However, there are some points that need to be mentioned with regard to the obtained results.

As mentioned above, the participating activists referred to their attempts in order to introduce the issues of Kurds, especially Barzani genocide, to people all over the world. By doing so, they aimed to attract the international attention toward those crises that Kurds have been through and whereby prevent other possible similar events from happening in the future. One of the most common means to publicize crises worldwide is mass media which, as mentioned by the activists in this study, has been employed by Barzani genocide activists to introduce the issue to the world. The role of media in intensifying or soothing humanitarian crises has been referred to in the Rwandan genocide by Thompson (2007) and Stavros (2016). In the study carried out by Mitchell (2007), it is reported that local and global media can play a significant role in publicizing, intensifying, and soothing the Rwandan genocide.

The second theme that emerged from analyzing the transcripts of the interviews was “archiving the event”. In the case of Rwandan genocide, there have also been numerous attempts to archiving the events involved with the crisis in order to help next generations remember those days and commiserate with the family of the victims. In the same regard, Dr. James Smith, Chief Executive of the Aegis Trust, stated that archiving genocide of Rwanda can provide invaluable evidence for the present and future generations to learn how genocide develops so as to understand how it may be prevented better.

The final theme in the present study was alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief. In this regard, the activists stated that their attempts and those adopted by the government have helped Barzani genocide survivors overcome their deep sorrow of losing their family members and relatives. In their study, Ahishakiye et al (2015) indicated that social support can help genocide survivors overcome their stress caused by the crisis. Moreover, Rubanzana et al. (2014) reported that employing evidence-based public health measures can reduce the incidence of suicide among genocide survivors.

Conclusion
According to the results of the present study, the Barzani genocide activists’ lived experiences were interpreted as three main themes namely, “Attempting to introduce Barzani genocide to international community”, “Archiving the event”, and “Alleviating the genocide survivors’ grief”, which indicates the activists’ attempts to document and record the true sides of Barzani genocide and help the survivors get over their deep grief. The results of the present study can be utilized by governmental bodies and healthcare practitioners in order to help the survivors experience less stress and sorrow.

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