Home alone: exploring the emotional challenges on children of overseas Filipino workers

Solo en casa: explorando los desafíos emocionales de los hijos de trabajadores filipinos en el extranjero

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ABSTRACT

The economy’s progress does not stop Filipino parents from working overseas and having to make the painful choice to leave their kids with their relatives; as a result, these kids face emotional difficulties that some people are unaware of their hidden feeling. This study aimed to discover the emotional challenges of Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW)’s children, how these children overcome the difficulties and their insight. We employed a descriptive phenomenological research design. Ten Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) children participated in the interview, and the data was analyzed using Colaizzi’s method. Results revealed the following themes: parental absence and emotional struggle with emotional challenges; healthy well-being and nurturing guidance for coping mechanisms; and acceptance for insights. The result of this study may become an aspiration to all their fellow Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW)’s children who now may face different circumstances in life being far away from their parents and to the parents who work overseas to know the situation of their children.

Keywords: Overseas Filipino Workers, Migrant Workers, Overseas Filipino Children, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Philippines.

RESUMO

El progreso de la economía no impide que los padres filipinos trabajen en el extranjero y tengan que tomar la dolorosa decisión de dejar a sus hijos con sus familiares; Como resultado, estos niños enfrentan dificultades emocionales de las que algunas personas desconocen su sentimiento oculto. Este estudio tuvo como objetivo descubrir los desafíos emocionales de los hijos de los trabajadores filipinos en el extranjero (OFW), cómo estos niños superan las dificultades y su percepción. Empleamos un diseño de investigación fenomenológico descriptivo. Diez niños trabajadores filipinos en el extranjero (OFW) participaron en la entrevista y los datos se analizaron utilizando el método de Colaizzi. Los resultados revelaron los siguientes temas: ausencia de los padres y lucha emocional con desafíos emocionales; bienestar saludable y orientación enriquecedora para los mecanismos de afrontamiento; y aceptación de ideas. El resultado de este estudio puede convertirse en una aspiración para todos los hijos de sus compañeros trabajadores filipinos en el extranjero (OFW) que ahora pueden enfrentar diferentes circunstancias en la vida al estar lejos de sus padres y para los padres que trabajan en el extranjero para conocer la situación de sus hijos.

Palavras-chave: Trabajadores filipinos en el extranjero, Trabajadores migrantes, Niños filipinos en el extranjero, Investigación cualitativa, Fenomenología, Filipinas.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Filipinos tend to work abroad due to economic factors, such as low wages and limited job prospects. Filipino nationals work overseas, usually in nations with strong labour markets. Remittances are a common way OFWs support their families back home in the Philippines, making a significant economic contribution. Somehow, allow the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) to give their families more economic opportunities. Moreover, they have beneficial and harmful effects on the children they left behind.

On the other hand, the remittances from overseas Filipino workers greatly enhance their families’ financial security, giving them access to better healthcare, education, and living conditions. However, the lack of parents might cause psychological and emotional problems for children, like feeling abandoned and not receiving guidance from their parents. Nevertheless, the sacrifices made by OFWs are vital in poverty reduction and how they help improve the quality of life for their children in the Philippines.
A significant number of left-behind children in China undergo the hardship of extended separation from their parents who work overseas. This prolonged separation can have profound implications for the psychological well-being of the children, particularly causing emotional distress, primarily due to disrupted attachment bonds. Unfortunately, these might not be easily reversible, even if the migrant parent turns home permanently. The level of psychological support the children receive (or the lack thereof) from the family members they live with, along with factors related to their academic performance and the sense of unity in their community, can either mitigate or exacerbate the impact of their parent’s absence on their well-being (Zhao, 2018).

In the Philippines, overseas work has become a variable solution in addressing the problem encountered by one cut of every 12 Filipino families. Although it has brought opportunities for a better, financially stable life, it has inevitable consequences that could affect children who are left behind (Penalda et al., 2019). Children have trouble with their own experiences of their parent’s departure and the difficulties they encounter due to their extended absence. Children left behind by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) are most affected by this problem: they may experience the emotions of helplessness while their parents manage longer and often irregular absences away from home (Beazley et al., 2017).

Locally, OFWs work primarily for economic reasons, such as to achieve financial stability. However, this brings an emotional disadvantage to the left behind children; they feel abandoned, helpless, lonely, pessimistic, deprived, isolated, and confronted with health and academic problems (Mahilum, 2013). It is alarming that their long absence makes a feeling meaningless. Children of OFWs indeed have good living conditions, but it is also true that their children are not satisfied with what they have. OFWs tend to overcompensate their children for their absence by materially giving them more money than appropriate (as cited by Tanalega, 2018). That causes children’s physical separation from their parents, eventually resulting in a communication gap between the children and their parents (as cited by Balico, 2018).

The primary purpose of this study was to discover the emotional challenges of OFW’s children, their insight, and how these children overcome the difficulties. The study’s findings may provide a deep understanding of the Emotional challenges of OFW's children. This study benefits the following people: (1) the policymakers, which would help them develop comprehensive and practical strategies in supporting the emotional well-being of children’s OFWs and address their challenges; (2) The OFW children, which would give them an idea and widen their knowledge on how to understand the emotional challenges of OFW children. It can also provide a comprehensive understanding of their challenges and find ways to implement effective interventions, support systems, and policies to improve their emotional well-being; (3) the OFW parents, which would help the OFW parents know and acknowledge the emotional struggles of their children. It would give them awareness of the effect of working abroad on the emotional well-being of their children; and (4) the future researchers, with the findings of this study, serve as an avenue in pursuing research studies on related topics.

**METHODS**

**Research Design**

In this study, the researchers used qualitative research. Qualitative research is a naturalistic method of query research that deals with the issue of human complexity by exploring it promptly. This type of research emphasized human complexity and the ability to express their experiences, interpretations, and perceptions about the situation (Austin & Sulton, 2014). This study follows a phenomenological design. It is an approach that seeks to describe the importance of a phenomenon through analyzing the point of view of those who have experienced circumstances. The phenomenological study described and gave relevant information about the experiences of OFW children (Distor & Campos, 2021). In this study, the researchers discovered the emotional challenges of OFW children in Barangay Zone I & III, Municipality of Santa Cruz, Davao del Sur.

**Research Participants**

This study has ten (10) participants through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a technique where participants should have the characteristics needed in the sample. In other words, purposive sampling intentionally selects units (Nikolopoulos, 2022). In selecting participants for the study, the researchers established the following criteria: They are 18-22-year-old OFW children residing in Barangay Zone I & III, Municipality of Santa Cruz Davao del Sur. Participants received an informed consent form, and their identities remained anonymous using labels instead of their real names.

**Instrument and Analysis**

In this study, the researchers used interview guide questions that professionals validated. The interview responses were analyzed using the Colaizzi method’s thematic analysis (as cited by Sanders, 2003). Colaizzi’s method of data analysis offers personal insight into how to present an auditable decision trail in a phenomenological research study to explore issues of rigour and trustworthiness.
RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Emotional Challenges of OFW Children

In mental health studies, separation from a parent has been shown to have detrimental effects on the psychological well-being of children in several different circumstances (Amato&Cheadle, 2005; Huure et al., 2006). In this study, two themes are identified based on the respondents' responses during the interview: parental absence and emotional struggles.

Parental Absence. The respondents feel the longing for the presence of their parents. Just like the statement of one of our respondents who said: “Longing to your mother's presence. Like I want to hug her but she is not there, so you just cry until you feel like the burden you feel will lessen” (Respondent 8, Page 14, Lines 210). This result affirms the claim of Rendeza (2017) that the participants expressed that they feel unfortunate, longing for their parents’ physical presence. They also struggle with emotional support, emptiness, and loneliness that they experience without their parents. “Yes, it is affecting, it is so hard it feels empty, whenever I need my mom, but I know she could not be there physically, I missed my mom, and I want to cry” (Respondent 5, Page 9, Lines 146). This affirms the study of Malijao et al. (2023) that the OFW children have reported loneliness, sadness, and frustration due to the separation from their parents. Other respondents also struggle with the hardship of being separated from the side of their parents. She said: “It is hard without a mother on your side. I am the one who is going to replace and become a mother to my three siblings, plus we are all girls. It is hard” (Respondent 4, Page 7 Line 108). Hence, this result affirms the claim of Lobos et al. (2019) that the relationship between parents and their children has been shifting in a manner that continuously reshapes views about parenting. This condition has resulted in questions regarding the adverse effects that parental absence could have on the well-being of children who are left behind. Consequently, in the conclusions drawn from the study by Jimenez (2009), parental absenteeism has a consequence on left-behind children by their OFW parents, whether they live with one non-OFW parent, live with relatives, or even live independently.

Emotional Struggles. The respondents reported that they have difficulties opening their emotions. “You cannot directly express your problems because no one is there to help you with your emotions aspect” (Respondent 10, Page 17, Lines 251). People can only approach someone if they are encountering personal problems (Visconti, 2012). In terms of the children's well-being, several studies have noted the experience of adverse effects, such as feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and difficulty in opening their feelings to their parents (Carandang et al., 2007; Melgar & Borromeo, 2002), and sadness (Battistella & Conaco, 1998; Scalabrini Migration Center, 2004). In addition, respondents had difficulties understanding why their parents worked abroad and felt incomplete. “I do not understand why it needs to work abroad, and now we feel incomplete” (Respondent 7, Page 12, Line 196). This result affirms the study of Visconti (2012), who states that the general challenge OFW children face is the incompleteness of their families. Whenever there are special occasions, they get jealous of other families. Furthermore, several studies have shown that the long-term experience of sudden separation from parents will negatively impact their children's emotional development, mainly when relying on themselves during emotional occurrences. Emotional maturity can be a vital element to an individual because its corresponding components may develop negatively, leading to emotional instability, emotional regression, social maladjustment, personality disintegration, and lack of independence (Malijao et al., 2023).

Coping Mechanism of OFW Children

The respondents manifested a healthy coping mechanism and tended to adopt more positive coping strategies when stressed (Navaro & Gorospe, 2014). Children with OFW parents adopt mechanisms on how to cope with such issues. In this study, healthy well-being and nurturing guidance are the themes that emphasize their responses.

Healthy Well-being. The respondents sought support from their grandparents, aunts, and friends to overcome the challenges she mentioned: “So I still got support from my siblings, my friends, especially to my grandparents and to my aunt who also works abroad which helps me during difficult times” (Respondent 2, Page 3, Lines 57). This asserted the result of Navarez & Diaz’s (2017) study that the presence of family, friends, and other significant persons played a crucial role, especially when they have difficulties and worries. The respondents also go to peaceful places to seek peace and value positive well-being to cope with their challenges. Just like the statement stated: “I find places where peaceful, that I can unwind like watching sunrise and sunsets in the oceans whenever I do not feel like to talk my problems with others and to absorb positive energy” (Respondent 8, Page 14, Lines 214). People who feel connected with nature, such as oceans, watching sunsets and sunrise, report being happier and having more positive emotions than those who do not share this connection (Andrews, 2024). The respondents mentioned that their openness to their OFW parents to address the problems and deal with prayers was essential to overcoming challenges; one of the respondents mentioned, “I made it through it by prayers; it is important to talk about it to God. Also, I chat my mom, through chat and video call then I told her ‘I missed you Ma’” (Respondent 5, Page 9, Lines 148). Left-behind children often talk about their problems and express their love and care with their OFW parents through phone, text, and video calls (Santiago, 2011). This result affirms the claims of Klent Rodni Delima.
(2022) that the OFW children shape their challenges into something more positive because they have shared that, in the long run, they could understand why their parents decided to work overseas.

**Nurturing Guidance.** The respondents think positively of their parents, and making them an inspiration is one of their coping mechanisms. “I overcame the challenges during that time because I always thought they worked abroad for us. I also think that they also have their struggles there, and I just do not think negatively here” (Respondent 2, Page 3, Line 51). As Leon (2011) also emphasized that make parents’ sacrifice worthwhile by using their absence as motivation rather than a cause for negativity. OFW children take the advice from their friends and relatives positively and apply it to themselves. “My Grandma told me to think that if the other OFW children survive the situation, then I can do too; my friend also used to believe that, so after a long time, unconsciously, I also survived the situation and accepted the reality of OFW children” (Respondent 4, Page 8, Lines 122). They were able to deal both physically and emotionally, and they acknowledged that their circumstances was an inevitable reality; still, there exists a need to aggravate their being, which must be satisfied (Bucoy et al., 2013). Parents’ of OFW children cannot give them guidance because they are physically absent, so only their guardians and friends give them motivation and guidance as well. Hence, what Amoguis et al. (2023) said was true that parents have the moral obligation and responsibility for nurturing and for the development of their children.

**Insight of OFW Children**

On a positive note, the absence of parents was a strong incentive for children to remain in school and study hard (Ang, 2008). In this study, acceptance emerged as a theme to emphasize their responses.

**Acceptance.** The respondents realized that their parents work abroad to provide and support their needs. This is similar to the statement revealed by one of the respondents: “I have realized that they go abroad to support and provide our needs, and they work not only for their good but also for us” (Respondent 1, Page 2, Lines 28). The same is true of the result discovered by Mahilum (2023), be it the father or the mother or both parents as OFWs; the primary purpose of working abroad was to provide the family with a good life. OFW children also valued the sacrifices of their parents by understanding that it was only for their good; who said, “What I can advise is that you should value the hard work of your parents, do not be mad at them for they just providing and sustaining our needs” (Respondent 2, Page 4, Lines 61). Parents’ sacrifices for their children are innumerable because being a parent means sacrificing their future for their future kids (Medha, 2015). Lastly, children of OFW hope for deeper understanding and to widen people’s minds that being far from their parents is challenging. Like the suggested statement, “Like hmm, like I hope that they understand that it is not easy being far to your mother, I hope them to understand that it is challenging” (Respondent 7, Page 13, Lines 204). Delima (2023) mentioned that this acceptance of their family situation presents itself as a specific need that the children have to process because they were too young to comprehend what was happening when their parents started working abroad. However, it is also understood from the experiences related by the participants that even if they have somewhat accepted their situation, they still long for their parent’s presence. Acceptance is an insight that is more beneficial than others, as children may learn to accept reality while their parents are away (Navarez & Diaz, 2017).

**CONCLUSIONS**

This study highlights the emotional challenges, coping mechanisms, and insight of OFW children. The findings showed that OFW children experience emotional challenges from parental absence and emotional struggles. However, regardless of their experience, healthy well-being and nurturing guidance are their coping mechanisms to overcome challenges. Acceptance is considered as their insights. Accepting that their parents work abroad to sustain their needs, they learned to understand their situation. The findings of this study might inspire other OFW children who are now facing difficult circumstances in their lives due to their distance from their parents and parents who work abroad and want to know about their children’s situation. This research is crucial to make people aware of the challenges these left-behind children face that stand and give value to their parents’ hard work.

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Florence: Interdisciplinary Journal of Health and Sustainability, V.2, N.1 35


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