



## Anxious, Apart, Attentive: A Qualitative Study on Parental Separation among OFW and Well-Being of the Left-Behind Children

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This qualitative research study delves into the intricate emotional and cultural dimensions of parental separation within the context of Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) families and the children they leave behind. Recognizing that this issue extends beyond the quantifiable aspects of economic impact, the study employs a qualitative research approach to capture the nuanced experiences of those directly affected by parental separation.

**Methods:** The researchers utilized a qualitative research with a phenomenological approach which allows the researchers to describe the essence of the phenomenon. The study used a semi structure interview questionnaire, majority of the questions are open ended to allow for the participants to express their own views. The researchers employed Colaizzi's approach to data analysis.

**Result:** The researchers acquired three (3) key themes: Anxious or worry and anxiety children feel due to conditions brought by parental separation, Apart or Limited Communication and Selective Disclosure, and, Attentive or Monitoring and Caring from a Distance. The sub-themes under Anxious or the worry and anxiety children feel due to conditions brought by parental separation revealed in the study included Loneliness and Depressive Feelings which is the emotional challenges and sense of isolation experienced by the interviewee due to a parent working abroad; and Describing Parent Relationship or the reflection of the interviewee's perception of their parent (OFW) and the qualities defining their relationship during childhood. The second theme Apart or the Limited Communication and Selective Disclosure presented the maintenance of communication and its importance in children of overseas working parents. The sub-themes formed under Attentive or Monitoring and Caring from a distance include Parental Handling and Imposition of Rules focusing on Parental Approach and Family Dynamics, Appreciation and Gratitude that represents the respondents expressed gratitude and understanding, and Support System that shed light to Coping Mechanism present to the Left Behind Children and support of Close Relations.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, Parental Separation Brings challenges in the Well-Being of the Left Behind Children by the impact the phenomenon leaves the bond of the parent and child which results to an insecure attachment style that is defined by anxiety, worry and fear of abandonment. In order to help the children, parents must find a way to bridge the gap that is brought by their time apart. The measures exerted by parents in communication and the support of the extended family and the caregiver responsible for the child bridges the gap and supports the child to cope and adapt, as well as the children's initiative to accept and understand the reality after considering and understanding the sacrifices made by their parents.

### INTRODUCTION

Raising and educating children to become responsible individuals is a significant responsibility of parents. By shielding their children from harm, offering guidance and assistance without any strings attached, parents can instill essential values in their children. However, due to the financial challenges and limited job prospects in the Philippines, some parents are forced to work overseas. Children who are left behind by their parents may experience emotional and psychological problems due to their parents' absence. Studies have shown that children left behind due to parental migration may experience negative impacts on their education, feelings of loneliness and sadness, and potential neglect. It is crucial to address the emotional and psychological needs of left-behind children (Yap, Cuenca, & Reyes, 2009).

Over the past few decades, unprecedented migration flows in many parts of the world have had profound impacts on family structures and the home communities of migrants (Lam et al., 2013). In 2013, 232 million people – 3.2% of the world's population – lived outside their country of origin (United Nations, 2013). An even higher number - an estimated 763 million people - are living within their own country but outside their region of birth (United Nations, 2013). Despite that families may be able to migrate together, the population movements often lead to separation between household members, with a variety of implications on both sides of families living apart: the migrants away from home (abroad or in another part of the country), and the left-behind children in their hometown. In particular, such separation is perhaps most concerning when it involves children left by one or both migrant parents, in the care of other caregivers (Asis, 2006). In most developed countries, the term "left behind-children" is used to describe children who fall behind in wellbeing, mainly relating to material wellbeing, education and health. To clarify, in this research, "left behind-children" (LBC)

refers to children who experience prolonged separation from their migrant worker parent(s). The number of LBC is high in many low- and middle-income countries, 14 where an increasing number of parents have joined the global movement of workers responding to labor shortages in wealthier regions (Graham & Jordan, 2011).

According to (Mapa, 2020), the Philippines has one of the largest diasporas in the world. There are an estimated 10 million Filipinos abroad, working for the promise of higher wages and better opportunities for themselves and for their families back home. In 2019, remittances from OFWs reached a record high of more than 200 billion Philippine Pesos (Php). For decades, the existence of OFW families (the Filipino variant of transnational families) has become a common feature in the societal landscape of the Philippines.

OFW families have had challenges that are not experienced by traditional nuclear families living together in a single household. These include social and emotional costs on the left-behind children, transnational parenting, maintaining communication ties despite the distance, persistence of gender disparities in caregiving, management of remittances, and establishing effective transnational family arrangements (Graham & Jordan, 2011; Reyes, 2007; UyTioco, 2007).

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## METHODS

**Study Design:** The researchers utilized a qualitative research with a phenomenological approach which allows the researchers to describe the essence of the phenomenon. The study used a semi structure interview questionnaire, majority of the questions are open ended to allow for the participants to express their own views. With the help of a phenomenological approach key areas were identified that needed to be explored in more depth. The data was collected on October 2023. Using a semi-structured interview guide comprised of 16 key point probing questions based on the Adult Attachment Interview Protocol (AAI) we collected in-depth information on the experiences of the children left behind by OFW Parents. The transcription was converted into code material using Collaizi's Method of Data Analysis, 1978 popular analytic method for qualitative research, in which the texts were evaluated and coded to yield themes. The themes served as the foundation for the development of thematic networks.

**Sampling Size and Technique:** In this research study, the researchers used purposive sampling technique. The researchers selected ten (10) respondents, 2 from each area local to each researcher. Here, the researchers intentionally selected the respondents that meet the predetermined criterion and deliberately choose participants who have specific experiences that are crucial to the research question. For this study, the criterion is children with the specified age range whose parents have been working overseas for a specified duration.

The collated data reflected particular characteristics about the phenomenon within the population area of interest allowing the researchers to extract responses and description coming from individuals who have confronted the experience first hand (Bala&Etikan, 2017).

**Setting of the Study:** The study was conducted in different areas in the Philippines with selected ten (10) participants were chosen with age range of thirteen (13) to twenty-one (21) years old and have parent/s working abroad for not less than three years.

**Data Gathering Procedure:** A semi-structured questionnaire, containing 3 key point questions, was prepared. The tool was formulated by the researchers and was validated by technical experts. After the corrections have been revised, a virtual one on one interview was utilized in attaining each of the respondent's perspective of the vulnerabilities and challenges which they are confronting. The questions dealt with reasons why their parents had to work abroad, perceptions of their conditions of having migrant work parents, the status of their relationships with their parents and other family members, and their feelings towards their situation. After consents have been gathered, pilot teting was conducted and the necessary revisions in the interview schedule was made, an interview schedule is set with the respondents and theory were met respectively. A virtual one on one interview was conducted according to schedule.

After the data has been gathered, an online debriefing session was conducted individually to entertain queries and complaints from the respondents about the data gathering procedure and validated the acquired information. After the debriefing session, the collected data is then settled for analysis.

**Limitations of the Study:** The study focuses on the effects of parental separation on the children of overseas Filipino workers who are left behind. The study was done from October 2023 to November 2023, and it was confined to the respondents who met the criteria.

The following criteria were used to identify respondents: (a) a parent who has been working overseas for more than three years, (b) a respondent's age range of 13 to 21 years old, and (c) willing involvement in the research.

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## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of data obtained from the respondent and the elicited themes from the participants' statements which revealed overarching themes unfolding their experiences as children with whom one parent or both works overseas as OFW, their identified vulnerabilities, and their personal coping strategies provided by their support systems. Alongside these, there were elicited theme which specified the aforementioned phenomenon.

### 1. Anxious: worry and anxiety children feel due to conditions brought by parental separation

#### Sub Theme 1: Loneliness and Depressive Feelings

Central Phenomenon: The emotional challenges and sense of isolation experienced by the interviewee due to a parent working abroad.

In the conducted interview, the respondents stated the challenges they have confronted

as children with parent(s) who leave the country for work. They recognized their early memories of separation as challenging as it is confusingly depressing with feelings of worry at an early age that they could not fully understand.

“I would feel sad and would end up with this mixed feeling of awkward loneliness and worry for I don’t know what, and that always left me confused. And though I could say that the goodbyes were always painful even as a child – I got used to it and later on I don’t feel that sad anymore. Mama, in Papa’s absence would be the one to attend school activities and recognition ceremonies, and I would get jealous with other children having both parents with them. This was the case until I didn’t and like I said I got used to him not being there”, as per Respondent 1

The majority of participants expressed a strong desire to see their parent throughout their parents’ long absences and the desire to emotionally connect with them.

“My mom went to abroad when I was just four years old. I don’t quite remember it but I think I cried a lot. Every year, I would hope that she will visit or be back home, she missed a lot of important events in my life and as well as my siblings, but she would take three years to come home and stayed only for a month before going back’, as per Respondent 7

“I felt so sad every time I go to school, most especially if there are events like family day or meeting with parents, both of them weren’t present. I was the one who didn’t have any of my parent present while other kids had theirs”, as per Respondent 5

“It was not easy since I have younger siblings with me. I was sad and I was afraid, they were explaining that the leaving of my mother was for us, but it did not take away the worries I even as a child,” as per Respondent 3

The phenomenon of parental separation has been taxing the children of Overseas Filipino Workers and creates fear of abandonment and worry over the separation of their primary caregiver. An attachment style is the connection established through the bond a child has with their primary caregivers (Bretherton I, 1992). Majority of the participants seemed to internalize their distress when coping with the separation. Participants displayed affection and sadness with clear emotional attachment, even when discussing their unpleasant sentiments about the parental separation.

“I was just child at 7 years of age when my father had to go abroad, I was close to him growing up and saw him as my hero and best friend, and when he left I just felt I was alone and left behind. I didn’t fully comprehend the reasons for his leaving, all I know was I was sad, I felt “angry, and scared – like I’ve been betrayed, like that and that he wouldn’t come back’, as per Respondent 2

“Being a child with parent’s who work abroad is really challenging. I used to get really depressed whenever I went to school, especially on family day or during parent-teacher conferences, when most of my classmates had their parents present”, as per Respondent 4

### **Sub Theme 2: Describing Parent and Relationship**

Central Phenomenon: reflection of the interviewee’s perception of their parent (OFW) and the qualities defining their relationship during childhood.

When asked to describe the relationship they have with their parent’s overseas, respondents gave responses encompassing a range of characteristics defining the kind of relationship they have formed with their parent.

“My father is strict. He would ask for us to update him on events and impose rules on our activities and school. This slightly awkward fear of him was maintained until now, I guess that’s because he is away and this strictness made me more open to my mother than him’, as per Respondent 1

“Although I know it is care that has motivated my parent to work away from us and know that she knows we care for her too. It is the separation that sometimes makes the caring go hand in hand with the worrying in both sides, hers and ours. We worry for her and she worries for us and then at times that creates small gaps because we try to hide information to keep us from worrying her”, as per Respondent 3

“Lonely, since I felt as if I was orphaned. I would look forward to the time I could be with them and be happy but I always doubted if we will be close again just like the old times.”, as per Respondent 5

Almost majority of the respondents found it challenging to maintain tight family relationships. This challenge derives from their inadequate communication abilities. with family members, inability to communicate their sentiments, feeling uneasy in their company, and missing the warmth of family. This has resulted in a schism between them and their children. parents, as evidenced by the following statements mentioned above.

### **2.Apart: Limited Communication and Selective Disclosure**

Central Phenomenon: Maintenance of communication and its importance in children of overseas working parents.

The maintenance of the relationship of OFW families rely on the ability to bridge gap of communication in parents working overseas and the children left behind. In the technological advantages of today, the use of online social media platforms and online messaging applications mark the method of choice of OFW Families. Although this does not guarantee the openness and quality of communication in the family members.

Banico (2010), contends that the physical separation of children from their parents eventually leads to a communication gap between the children and their parents. In order to fill this gap, parents have to exert effort in making their presence felt even in the long-distance relationship they have with their children.

“We communicate via Messenger to give updates. I report to him the things he asks of. My father is strict and would always call to see how things are and ask for the events that happened to me. Although I don’t really open up to him about all the things in my life because of fear of getting scolded but it does make me feel better knowing that he is asking and talking to me”, as per Respondent 1.

“When they call to confide in us their struggles, I would pray for them and fervently hope that everything will work out. I feel awkward to tell them things and I think it might add to their worries, so what they need to know and what can lighten up their day, that’s what I say”, as per Respondent 5

### **3.Attentive: Monitoring and Caring from a Distance**

#### **Sub Theme 1: Parental Handling and Imposition of Restriction**

Conceptual Phenomenon: Parental Approach and Family Dynamics

Addressing issues in the family that arise through discussion and issuance of specific restriction with OFW Families come as a challenge, but majority of the respondents have verbalized the decisions made with regards to the family still come from both parents even if one or both are away from them, and discussion of challenges or problems are still done despite the distance – as evidenced by the following statements:

“since I am the eldest, I learn to be responsible with household chores and my siblings. However whenever problems come, I still cannot resolve them without having to consult with my parent even when we are apart”, as per Respondent 3

“My parents constantly keep an eye on us and chat with my grandmother about our lives. The updates come from my grandma – mostly about school. They are unlikely to threaten us when they impose rules, however I find them strict but I understand”, as per Respondent 4.

“whenever problems arise, discussing them with us would be the resolve of my parents... it won’t always be the case if they are busy, but if they can, they’d call our attention first before resorting to a disciplinary action” as per Respondent 7

#### **Sub Theme 2: Appreciation and Gratitude**

Conceptual Phenomenon: Represents the respondents expressed gratitude and understanding

Despite the fact that they may not have had adequate parental presence, they were nevertheless grateful for their parents' sacrifice and financial support. However, if offered another option. They still wanted their parents to live with them at home, which they considered invaluable. in comparison to the tangible items they acquired from them.

“I understand that my mother needs to provide for our needs. They always remind us to be responsible and not to waste money. And I do that and because I know their struggles, I am doing my best in my studies”, as per Respondent 3

“The decision of my parents to work abroad stems from their need to support our family financially. I do understand this, and I am grateful that we can buy food and we don’t go hungry; that we also have enough to buy what we want and need, though I still wish we can be together instead of just gifts wrapped in balikbayan boxes every holidays”, as per Respondent 5

“I could say that despite not being present on school activities and holidays, for which I am truly sad – I still am thankful that I am his child. He works away from us, for us, that I know. I just wish we could spend more time together and not just calls and chats every now and then” as per Respondent 10

#### **Sub Theme 3: Support System**

Conceptual Phenomenon: Support and Coping Mechanism through Close Relations

The enormous distance does not prevent OFWs families from offering emotional support and guidance to their children. Despite the visible effects of negative relationships, the extended family copes and continues to be a source of advice, motivation, and encouragement, helping the children navigate life's challenge. This unwavering support helps children develop resilience and self-confidence.

“Except my mother who is with us, my grandparents offer their support too. They check up on us every now and then, and they’d be at school activities as substitutes they would say. Maybe I got used to my father away, but the reason why I have somehow coped with the distance is the support of my mother and grandparents” as per Respondent 1

“My grandmother and aunt has been helpful and act as a parental figure to me and my siblings. My grandmother would be on the phone updating my parents regarding our activities and she would always remind us of the why we have to do good in studies and call our parents to talk whenever we can. She somehow bridges us to them, and them to us. I couldn’t always open up to them but I’m glad to have them with us” as per Respondent 4

Maintaining a close family relationship had been very difficult for almost all of the

Interviewees. Such difficulty stems from their limited communication with family members, inability to express their feelings, being uncomfortable in their presence, and missing the warmth of family. However the presence of guardians and family relatives in addition to the support system extended by their OFW parents compensate for the physical non-contact with their absentee parents.

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## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. The study revealed that children who are left behind due to parental separation experience significant emotional and psychological distress. This manifest as anxiety, depression, and feelings of abandonment and defines the attachment style present in majority of them.
2. Some children develop resilience and coping mechanisms and this stems on the avai. Children adapt to the change in family dynamics by finding support in other family members or peers.
3. Despite the challenges the respondents have faced, they still acknowledge the sacrifices of their parents and express gratitude towards their sacrifices
4. Overall, the level of support and communication from both parents plays a crucial role in mitigating negative effects of parental separation on children and the well-being of children depends on the active involvement and positive parenting can significantly help in the child's adjustment and well-being

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## Recommendations

Based on the conclusions and findings, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhanced Parental Support and Communication. Encourage both parents to maintain open, honest, and age-appropriate communication with their children.
2. That result of this study will be the guide in recommendation od professional counseling program for children to help them process their emotions and adjust to the changes in their family structure.
3. Advocate for the implementation of support systems in schools, such as counseling services and peer support groups, to assist children who are dealing with parental separation.
4. Increase public awareness about the impacts of parental separation on children and educate the community on how to support affected families effectively.
5. The government should further design interventions and support mechanisms that are tailored to the age, developmental stage, and personality of the child, recognizing that different children may have different needs – assisting the families of OFW in coping to the challenges of Long-Distance Relationships.
6. For the future researchers, if they were to conduct a similar study, it is recommended to choose the same model with a larger group of respondents nationally

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