



EXPERIENTIAL JOURNEY OF FEMALE COLLEGE STUDENTS AS SINGLE PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

The experiential journey of female college students as single parents sought insight on the lived experiences of the participants as they go through their flight of having dual responsibilities – in their homes with their children and in the school as college students. The participants in the study were left with sole responsibilities of parental obligations as when they got pregnant, no boyfriends/husbands commit for shared duties. This study followed the Empirical Phenomenological Method of Research with the concepts of Filipino Psychology in examining the phenomenon in depth based on the participants' experiences. The participants were interviewed using guide questions, and individual responses were analysed in detail to come up with emergent themes. The themes that emerged were the following: family disgrace, frustration and financial hardships to family acceptance and support – child as the mediator; single parent-social stigma; dual responsibilities against time; college education as a means for self-pride and the betterment of financial life; utang na loob drive (debt of gratitude) and; life is difficult - mind before emotion- child as the driving force.

KEYWORDS: *single parents, phenomenology, lived experiences*

I. INTRODUCTION

Going to college or continuing a college education is a tough decision most especially if the student is a single parent. The time allotted for a full-time review of lessons, research works or projects and other requirements is divided for the care of a child, other household responsibilities and even part time work just to sustain financial needs. Aside from balancing their time, the psychological and social consequences on them when labeled as single parents turn into student-parents are another aspects that call for a resilient decision of pursuing college education.

The existence of single parents as students in colleges and universities is increasing worldwide. Bowl (2000, cited by Sajidkyut, 2012) posited that the phenomenon of single parents in colleges/universities have triggered interest all over the world because they comprise conspicuous number in the student-population in all countries. According to the Institute for Women's Policy Research in the US, there are 3.9 million students who are parents and 1.9 million parents in college are single parents (Couch, 2013). In addition to that, the National Center for Education Statistics reported that more than one-fifth of all undergraduates are parents (Wol, 2015). However, there was no concrete report of the statistics based on the gender of the single parents in colleges. In the Philippines, it has been observed that there is an increasing drift with single parenting. The Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (2012) posted in their 2012 report that almost

14 million Filipinos are single parents, but no notes as to how many are in colleges and universities.

Philippine universities and colleges are not banning female students who are single parents from continuing their tertiary education and aiming for a college degree. Aside from the fact that the schools may not have the idea that students are single parents, the Magna Carta for Women or Republic Act 9710 serves as student-parents' protection to stay in school and continue their studies because this law states women's right in school even they have contacted pregnancy without marriage. Moreover, female students are to be given focus in this study due to the fact that in Philippine culture, the responsibility of rearing child/children out of wedlock is usually left to the mother who has to juggle mixed tasks. However, the personal conflicts that the female students as single parents may meet while in school are not within the realm of college education and the students are left to decide among themselves on how to surpass their college life and fit their selves in the traditional university/college structure where no special provisions are given for them. In as much that even few studies were conducted on the pressures met by single parents as students seldom can be found focusing on the flight of those college female student-parents while they are in school. The journey these female students are undertaking and have to undertake while pursuing a college degree and at the same time nurturing their children would offer a wider field of consciousness as a social phenomenon that instigate deeper study.

II. OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to look deeper into the experiential journey of female college students as single parents. Specifically, it delved into three phenomenological questions: “What are the issues female college students facing as single parents?”; “Why and how do they persist to continue their college education?” and “What are their realizations with regards to their present status in life?”

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants- Since this study examined female single parent-students from their own perspectives, five participants were purposively chosen from the different programs in Aklan State University where they are currently enrolled. All participants have never been married after getting pregnant as their boyfriends left them without the promise of financial or any support and they are not presently cohabitating with other man, instead, they found shelter with their own family. They were identified through the recommendations of instructors/professors and other students. Only the pseudo names of the participants were mentioned in this study.

Procedure- Taking into account the purpose and nature of the study, the Empirical Phenomenological Research Method (EPRM) and the concepts of Filipino Psychology were utilized. The EPRM according to Moustakas (1994), uses experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provides basis for the reflective analysis in depicting the true essence of the experience. The aim of this method is to determine the meaning of the experience to the individuals who have had the experience in order to form a general meaning. The Filipino Psychology on the other hand is “the scientific study of psychology derived from the experience, ideas, and cultural orientation of the Filipinos” (Yacat, 2013). Using the EPRM partnered with the Filipino Psychology gave voices to the participants’ experiential journey of being student-parents based on their own conscious perspective of relating their experiences through the lens of their personal, cultural and social upbringing. In the preparation and collection of data, the following phenomenological methods were employed based on Moustakas (1994): (1) formulate the question; (2) conduct literature review and determine original nature of study; (3) develop criteria for selecting participants: obtain informed consent, insure confidentiality and agree to place and time commitments; (4) develop instructions and guiding questions needed for the phenomenological research interview; (5) engage in the Epoche process (setting aside prejudgement and unbiased presence); (6) bracket the question and (7) conduct the qualitative research interview. The interview was done through an individual face-to-face oral communication carried out in a manner which was informal, non-directive and with the sensitivity on the part of the researcher when employing the concepts of Filipino Psychology through the utilization of indigenous technique which were the *pakikipagpalagayang-loob*: act of mutual trust, *pakikipag-usap*: informal conversation and *pagtatanung-tanong*: spontaneous asking of questions (Enriquez, 1978). The guide questions used in the interview were patterned from Patton’s (1990) suggestions: Knowledge questions that will ask about demographic and other factual information about the participants; feeling questions to obtain the participants’ emotional responses and values regarding the topic at hand and: the opinion questions that will give the participants the leeway to offer their own perspective on the phenomenon in their lives. Moreover, all conversations were recorded using

an audiotape and field notes which were then transcribed verbatim by the researcher. Lastly, to ensure the accuracy of the responses, the researcher asked the participants’ confirmation with what were written in the field notes.

In the analysis of data, the procedures for the phenomenological data analysis formulated by Creswell (*Phenomenological Studies- According to Creswell*, 2018) were used: (1) highlight significant statements, sentences and quotes and develop clusters of meaning from themes; (2) statements and themes are then used to write a textual and structural description and; (3) write composite description that presents the essence of the phenomenon. To ensure the correctness in following the phenomenological analysis as well as in formulating the universal essence of the phenomenon, the researcher requested the assistance of a social science researcher who was also engaged in a phenomenological researches.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In line with the formulated research questions to understand the experiential journey of female college students as single parents, several themes emerged from this phenomenon:

Family disgrace, frustration and financial hardships to family acceptance and support – child as the mediator. One of the issues besetting the student – parents is on how the family would accept the reality that one of the family members (a daughter) brought disgrace by bearing a child with no husband to face the responsibility of rearing a child. This in turn results to frustration especially to the parents who expect their daughters to bring pride to the family through a college diploma and eventually have a dignified job. Mia, one of the participants shared that her father cried upon knowing that she was pregnant and that the boyfriend could not be contacted anymore. She knew that her father was very ashamed of what happened to her and at the same time frustrated because he expected a lot from her, especially that she was just 16 years old at that time. In the Philippine culture, the family is considered as the primary supporter and provider for the child’s needs. With a close family ties, the belief that what happened to a family member may affect the entire family is an inevitable occurrence. According to Chao & Tseng (2002), the behavior of every child in the family speaks for the entire family members and could either bring shame or pride. Thus, if one child will do things that are unacceptable in the community, the whole members of the family would feel *hiya* (shame), which according to Enriquez (1994), is a genuinely held value referring to dignity and propriety which should be treated with great respect. The worst scenario is if the daughter is still in school and becomes pregnant. In this case, female student-parents could receive unwelcome remarks from the traditional families who are very adamant to accept the reality of having a child out of wedlock. All the participants also experienced financial hard-ups since they all belong to an average income family, especially when their children suffered from sickness and needed to be brought to a clinic or a hospital, plus the fact that they have to pay school finances including projects and other miscellaneous expenses.

Elaine Adams, coordinator of the Ecovillage program at Berea College in Berea Ky, pointed out that it’s very difficult for single parents in getting their degree especially if they lack family support and that they are just on their own (Couch, 2013). This is parallel to the research conducted by Mason

(2002, cited by Buteau, 2015) which shows that in an interview conducted to fourteen single parent women who narrated their experiences while they were in college. All of them agreed that one of the barriers in higher education is lack of emotional support from family and friends who considered schooling as just a waste of time. Furthermore, Mangino (2008) in her research about teen-mothers who are graduating in high school disclosed through her result that the success of these students in graduating from high school was due to familial acceptance and support. If the home and the society condemn student-parents' status and brought the latter varied negative emotional and psychological impact, it is evident then that among the root causes of challenges single female student-parents are encountering while striving to finish their studies, the home and the society are one of the catalysts. The only thing they were thankful was the support of the family which always finds ways to help them in spite of difficulties in looking for financial needs.

Unexpectedly, based on the participants' experiences was that the family gradually accepted the former's situation and showed support in all aspects especially when it comes to the baby's needs. The participants revealed that their family really loves their children to the extent that one participant shared that she felt that her grandmother loves her baby more than her who was a spoiled granddaughter before she had become pregnant.

Single parent-social stigma. It has been observed that there is an increasing population of Filipino single mothers. Based on the estimates of the DSWD in 1997, there were almost 500,000 unwed mothers. In 2012, it was reported that at least 13.9 million Filipinos are single parents (Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, 2012). It just simply shows that single – parenting in the Philippines is stealthily increasing and the familial acceptance is observed to be also growing. It was however felt by the participants that in their situation, they cannot have the full understanding and acceptance of the members of the society and usually regarded as “disgrasyada” (mother with no husband) with negative connotation of being immodest women. They shared that they heard negative remarks from other people and one participant even shared that she was very ashamed and pitied her father because other people blamed him for what happened to her. In line with this, is the research conducted by Ajandi (2011) which revealed that single mothers are affected by difficulty in the education system not only because of the lack of support in school but also from the obstacles they experienced in the larger community due to some discrimination such as ageism, sexism and their family status. In addition to that, if the society according to Mangino (2008) condemns student-parents' status and brought the latter varied negative emotional and psychological impact, it is evident then that among the root causes of challenges single female student-parents are encountering while striving to finish their studies, the society is one of the catalysts.

Dual responsibilities against time. The marital status should not be one of the obstacles in pursuing a college education. However, it has been observed that female single parents have found difficulty to complete a college degree. One of the issues faced by all participants is the time they have to spend in school as well as school requirements that they supposed to accomplish at home, and the time for their children coupled with household chores. Rona, one of the participants shared that she really had difficulty in

managing her time in order to pass her subject requirements before the deadline. She usually asked help from her classmates to help her in some individual projects. On the other hand, all of them wishes if only professors would understand – not too tight with the deadlines of the submissions of the requirements because of what they are going through. This issue in time which challenged the participants' life is felt by other student-parents globally through some conducted researches. According to Tehan (2007), a large issue faced by single parent-students is time management where they have to balance work, school and children especially if they have without much help from others. According to Stone, Nelson and Niemann (1994, cited by Tehan, 2007) in their study about the effect of sociological and psychological belief factors on the academic success of single-mother college students, the participants worked hard to the extent of not only compromising their family life just to meet their academic requirements but also their social and personal needs. Wol (2015), on the other hand described parenting and going to college at the same time as a difficult thing to do for the latter has to deal with money, time management and finding good-quality childcare. In addition, Kotwal and Prabhakar's (2009) research about problems faced by single parents showed that financial problem was the main stressor for most of the single mothers and that their emotional and social life were also affected by their single status. What exacerbates the situation is once these single mothers enter school for their college education and have many academic requirements that entail the use of financial resources, aside from the regular tuition fees. Sajidkyut (2012), cited that a research in the Philippines indicated that single mothers who pursue their college degree experience excessive stress brought by financial needs for the family. But although most researches pointed to money as the top barrier or a very challenging issue on the lives of female single-parents in colleges or universities other issues considered to be very difficult to overcome are the sacrifices such as sleep, social and personal interests as well as the guilty feeling for having no enough time with their children's activities (Mason, 2002). Aside from that, single parent-students' frustration with some professors who will berate them for missing classes or coming in late because they have to attend to their children first are considered a hidden struggle for which professors in school did not take time to know (Buteau, 2015).

College education as a means for self-pride and the betterment of financial life. Despite of the hardships confronting female single parent-students, they still continue to work hard for their college degree. What motivates them could be a remarkable determination that pushes them to go on. According to Nellum and Davis (2014), it was reported by The Higher Education Today that undergraduate students with children must balance their dual responsibilities (family and work responsibilities), which “traditional” students (those that are not still parents) do not face. Identifying child-care options and securing financial support outside of higher education to support their families (Philippine universities are not giving financial assistance for female single parent-students) are included among those responsibilities. But why do they continue to pursue their college education? One of the participants answered that if she could finish her college degree, she can find jobs that can support the needs of her child. It is through education according to another participant that she can elevate her life

from financial struggle and in the preparation for the future of her child. All participants saw education as hope for changing their financial status as college diploma/ degree according to them is a passport for a job which obviously would bring financial security. Moreover, they also regarded college education as their way to show to others that they can strive and achieve college degree in spite of their marital status which will give them a sense of pride. The views of the participants were supported by Buteau (2015), which was participated by fourteen single mothers who were successful students in higher education revealed a theme that emerged from their interviews on the values of education. The participants believe that a college education will lead them to have a better life, a more satisfying career and would promote high respect from possible employers. Through education, they perceived also that their ability to communicate with other people will be enhanced, help them to adjust to the changing society and at the same time, foster their sense of being empowered with pride, dignity and esteemed self. The participants also came up with commonalities on the things that kept them going and finishing their college education. These were their concern for their children's future, their faith in higher being and their belief that quitting means failure. Similarly, results from researches reported by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (2013) revealed that through education, student-parents' children will be benefitted for when they have their degree, it means higher earnings, greater access to resources and that they will be able to get involved more on their children's education especially that there is a greater possibility for the latter to also pursue a college degree.

Utang na loob drive (debt of gratitude).

According to Leaño and Corpuz (2012), *utang na loob* is a Filipino value by which somebody has that feeling of obligation or a debt to repay someone who has extended assistance to another which may come in any form. This is true based on the participants' admissions that they were motivated to continue their studies because they wanted to pay back the hardships experienced by their family. One of the participants shared that she found her father crying because he found it very difficult to make the ends meet for the entire family especially that during that time, her baby got sick. Another participant admitted that she felt very guilty because the grandmother has to borrow money from their relatives in order to buy the needs not only for the baby but also for her allowance in school. She said she really has to finish her studies in order to pay *utang na loob* to her family especially to her grandmother who sacrificed a lot for her and her baby. Sheren, another participant who claimed as a papa's girl, felt very undeserving for her father's love for she failed to reciprocate it with a college degree before she entered motherhood.

Life is difficult - mind before emotion-child as the driving force. With regards to the question on the realization of the participants with their present status, all of them disclosed that it's very difficult for them to do the dual responsibility of going to school and in caring for their children. One of the participants said that she experienced to panic when her daughter had a fever and had to attend to her class and get a quiz. What worsened the situation was that her mother didn't have money for the child's medical check-up. She added that she realized the sacrifices her mother did for her and she felt ungrateful for not rewarding her mother

with good grades, instead brought disgrace and frustration because of unplanned pregnancy. But still, she has to strive for her family especially for her baby. Next time she said that when she makes decisions particularly in having a romantic relationship with somebody, she will make sure that she is very much ready not only emotionally but financially because according to her, life is very difficult. What's good was that she's looking forward for a good life someday. Another participant disclosed that she really had to be very tight in budgeting her allowance and time so that she can buy the things for her studies and her baby and spend enough time with her child. She shared that when she was not yet a mother, she always spends "chill times" (relaxation times) with her friends. But now, she had to leave the old life styles and always in a hurry to go home to see her child. Another participant experienced being a product model to help her family from household expenses especially that she added a new member in the family. She said that if she could only turn back the time, she had rather used her mind first before giving in to her emotion. But when she looked at her child, she said it gave her strength to go on with her life even how hard it was. Another participant disclosed that she realized how much she loves her child when her mother told her that the latter will adopt the child. She said that whatever happens, she will raise her kid and still proud to be called a mother. She was very emotional when she shared that upon knowing that she's pregnant, she planned and actually tried to abort her baby because she thought her family would disown her; her friends, classmates and other people will blame and condemn her. But now according to her, she's not ashamed but instead, proud of her beautiful baby. All participants revealed that every time they were with their kids, they erased the thought of blaming themselves for wrong decisions. Seeing their children grow gave them unexplained strength to continue their journey in life.

V. CONCLUSION

With the increasing records regarding the existence of single parents in the Philippines, it is assumed that this phenomenon is an ordinary event which gained social acceptance even in a conservative Filipino family with unnoticed significance of the life stories of the persons' involved. Notwithstanding, the fact that in Humanistic Psychology, every individual is given fair share of importance and the minority's voice be heard for better understanding and future assistance for the resolutions of issues and concerns. It's really indispensable to shed lights upon assumptions to have a detailed inquiry on the journey of female single parents who at the same time college students based on the participants' lived experiences.

All participants in this study have experienced issues with their families, school and community. These include family disgrace and shame, frustrations, financial constraints, study and personal time conflict and social humiliations. However, despite of such issues, *ang pamilya ay pamilya* (the family is a family) so to speak. Family members gradually developed the atmosphere of acceptance and supports in any ways. This only shows that Filipino family still holds on to the culture of family cohesiveness especially when a child enters the family scene. All the participants were motivated to continue their studies despite of the issues and concerns they experienced, for they all believe that through education, they can reclaim their own and their family's stained reputation and relieve their family from financial hardships. Moreover,

