

Uncertain Living: Challenges of Orphans in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Orphan studies are scarce internationally and locally. However, the implications of these orphans are tantamount to the society's effort to advancement. One of the problems that the Philippines need to address is its status on the abandoned, neglected and orphaned children. The country has an

abandoned children problem (Kaiman & De Leon, 2016). About 1.8 million children in the Philippines are under the status of abandoned or neglected. This phenomenological study focused on the experiences, aspirations, and fears of orphaned children living in and outside the orphanage. The study sought ethical clearance from the ethics committee to ensure that ethical standards were observed. Trustworthiness and rigor were ensured through member checking. Measures to protect participants' confidentiality and anonymity were followed. Five (5) participants were purposively chosen through criterion sampling and data were collected through semi-structured interview. Narratives were transcribed verbatim and reflectively analyzed using Collaizi's (1978) Procedural Steps. Analyzed narratives revealed three (3) dominant themes: (1) Nay, Tay, Bakit? Questions of Sufferings, (2) Paglaho ng Alaala: Standing Anchored in the Ground (3) Bakas ng Nakalipas: A Choice to Move Forward. The study revealed that the orphans underwent social, emotional, mental, spiritual and physical difficulties as an orphaned child. The study includes suggestions and recommendations for exploring the health and nutritional status and psychological well-being of an orphan.

Keywords — Social Science, orphans, phenomenological approach, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines is a developing country that has made significant economic progress in the last few years. However, this progress that the Filipino people are enjoying it without any problems. One of the problems that the Philippines need to address is its status on the abandoned, neglected and orphaned children. The country has an abandoned children problem (Kaiman & De Leon, 2016). About 1.8 million children in the Philippines are under the status of abandoned or neglected (United Nations' Children's Rights & Emergency Relief Organization, 2018). This is more than 1% of the entire population. Some of the factors that contribute to this growth are extreme poverty, victims of natural disasters and armed conflicts. The Department of Social Welfare and Development is the responsible agent for ensuring these children to find homes. Data reveals that between 2009 and 2015, American families adopted around 1,350 Filipino children.

According to the World Bank Orphans and Other Vulnerable Children (OVC) Toolkit, an orphan is a person who is below 18 years of age, and whose

mother, father, or both are deceased. However, other children were considered as social orphans as their parents unlawfully discarded their duties as parents due to either poverty or illness. These children end up roaming in the streets to survive, or if they are fortunate enough, they are taken to an orphanage, where they receive primary care and support.

Bethany Christian Services (n.d) pointed out the reality that majority of the world's orphans had families before. There were even definitions of different types of orphans, a 'single orphan' whose mother or father is deceased, a 'paternal orphan' which refers to a child whose father had died, a 'maternal orphan' which refers to a child whose mother had died and a 'full orphan' or 'double orphan' which refers to a child whose parents had both died-these were all categorized as 'true orphans'. Moreover, by 'social orphans' these were children that one parent or both parents were lost because of abandonment, or relinquishment due to poverty, alcoholism, or imprisonment.

Orphaned children compared to non-orphaned are disadvantaged regarding several facets including but not limited to family relationship, education, and finance. In addition to the trauma of witnessing the death and illness of one or both parents, orphans lack emotional and mental support. They are more likely to undergo problems in cognitive and emotional development (UNICEF, 2003). Children who had lost one or both parents are witnessed by the society but are still not addressed. This phenomenon happened in Sub Saharan Africa where the support from locality and government is not enough to solve the issue (Fredriksson-Bass & Kanabus, 2004).

Also, orphaned children grew up with a lack of love from their parents and the basic needs for survival, and now they have to face this sad reality. Numerous works of literature provide help to address the needs of the orphans and to support families and localities to improve their capacity to cope with as orphanages are not a sustainable long-term solution for this kind of phenomenon (UNAIDS, 2002).

The circumstances of orphanhood vary by country and region of the world. This had been one of the worldly concerns. The fact that being 18 years old and below made these children even more vulnerable as they have no foundations to build upon nor have a certain future. This shows the fact that orphanhood is an economic phenomenon much related to the notion of childhood which was shown to be an economic and social construct that can have no universal validity.

This study aimed to understand the challenges of an orphan child living in the orphanage. The researchers wanted to know what the experiences of the children are. Furthermore, the researcher also aimed to recognize the actual state of an orphan in the Philippine setting.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

It was stated by Husserl (1963) that “phenomenology studies the structure of various types of experience such as perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness embodied action, and social activity, including scientific activity.” According to classical Husserlian phenomenology (2008), individual’s experience is directed toward—represents or ‘intends’—things only through particular concepts, thoughts, ideas, images, etc. the structure of these forms of experience typically involved what Husserl called ‘intentionality.’

Descriptive phenomenology was about producing ‘thick descriptions’ of people’s experiences and perspectives within their natural settings. This research design was used by researchers to determine the ideal qualities of using qualitative research. The researchers utilized the descriptive method to collect and gather their data wherein an interview was held with five orphaned children to answer the research problem. The gathered data were used as bases to support the problem.

Research Site

The research was conducted inside the Reception and Action Center of DSWD Lucena.

Lucena City is the capital of Quezon Province in Region IV-A. It is a 2nd class highly urbanized city. It has a total population of 266,228 people (Census, 2015).

The establishment of the Reception and Action Centers for Boys (RAC) has significantly supported the care, protection, development, and rehabilitation of the orphaned children, particularly the potentially neglected in Lucena. At the Reception and Action Center for Boys, the health and basic needs of the 114 boys are being provided for by the center; it also provides either formal or non-formal education, spiritual enhancement through various activities and programs.

Participants

Participants were the orphaned Filipino children who experienced different challenges in their lives. The participant child must be in the age of 10-19 years old and must be willing to share his/her story. Informed consent and assent were secured before the commencement of the interview and data gathering

procedures. Five (5) participants were chosen from the Reception and Action Center. A therapist was readily available in case of distressed feelings among the participants.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data was gathered through a face-to-face interview with the participants. The Reception and Action Center validated the interview questions. The questions in the interview were formulated by the researchers and were validated by the research adviser for suitability about child protection policy. The researchers assured confidentiality of this interview and held responsible for protecting personal information and reputation of the respondents.

The researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide and narrative approach in data gathering to ensure that the study would be consistent. The interview was conducted on the most favorable time and condition to ensure readiness among the respondent. With the use of the descriptive phenomenology, the researchers asked the participants to tell their experiences in a detailed manner as possible. The participants were allowed in sharing and narrating one's story. The researchers' questions for the participants were used to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and to prevent the researchers from interrupting the interview process; intriguing questions were avoided. After the collection of data, the researchers offered a simple token to the participants for their trust and willingness to cooperate in this study since they belong to the late childhood period.

Transcriptions were done word per word and were translated into English. Also, the researchers identified the verbal and non-verbal cues including the body language and gestures. Trustworthiness and rigor of the data were observed during the conduct of the study.

The Process of Reflective Analysis

In this descriptive phenomenological paper, the method by Colaizzi (1978) was used to analyze all the transcription and narratives of the participants who were significant for the researchers to validate the research objectives. Smith (2009) commented on the importance of consensus in a research study and contributed to positive interdependence (Johnson and Johnson 2009).

Establishing Trustworthiness and Rigor

Trustworthiness was important in conducting qualitative research. The researchers became open to accept the results of the interview to be able to avoid data manipulation.

Credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability were ensured to attain study rigor.

Data Analysis

Swanson (2004) and Wojnar (2005) argued that rigorous analysis of data constitutes the second component of the detailed phenomenological investigation. Colaizzi's (1978) method was used to guide the analysis. This includes the reading and rereading of the participant's transcripts, extracting the significance statements, formulating meanings to illuminate meanings hidden in various context, categorizing into clusters of themes and validating original text to identify experience common to all, describe to generate prototype of theoretical model, revalidating findings to participants, and incorporating any changes based on the participants' feedback.

Ethical Consideration

The study observed the welfare of the participants such as confidentiality, fidelity, respect for participants and autonomy, and acquiring consent to the respective officials. Ethical standards also protected the anonymity of the participants.

The letter of consent and assent was presented to the respective officials concerning the interview by the researchers. The researchers also informed the participants entirely regarding the procedures and purpose of the research project. Also, the researchers ensured that the participants' engagement in this study was done voluntarily and were given an option to withdraw their involvement any-time freely.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After the interview narratives reflection, three (3) major themes emerged: (1) *Nay, Tay Bakit? Questions of Suffering*; (2) *Paglaho ng Alaala: Standing anchored in the Ground*; and (3) *Bakas ng Nakalipas: A Choice to Move Forward*. The themes were constructed from the narratives of the participants and were validated and counter-validated by the participants themselves.

The resulting themes show the genuine experiences of the participants in facing orphan challenges.

Theme 1: Nay, Tay Bakit? Questions of Sufferings

After careful analysis and reflection of the narratives, Nay, Tay Bakit? Questions of Sufferings was the first theme that emerged. Three sub-concepts were identified under this theme: (1): Searching for Answers (2): Self Doubt among Others and (3): Trials along the Journey. This theme expounds the participants' perspective on the challenges faced by an orphaned child and how they confront the struggles in life. *Cinderella* shared her questions about her parents on why they left them:

(“...because I do not know why, why they left me? If they love me if they love us, why do they need to leave us like that, it is hard to explain...”)

Hiro also shared their sentiments about their parents after they left them:

(“...why did you leave me, why did you run away...?”)

Their insecurities among others were also a significant challenge to them as they faced their everyday lives. *Harry* shared that:

(“...It is like, you are having a feeling of envy towards other, and it is just like you feel anger towards yourself like I am the unluckiest child...”)

Also, *Lilo* shared that:

(“... “I envy other people because they have a father, but all I have is a mother...”)

Their challenges also evidenced their struggles in life as they grow up. Some participants attested that it was hard to accept from other people about the fact they are already orphans. According to *Harry*:

(“...They always ask me how I managed to survive, without a father, they are looking for my father... they keep on asking who my father is to them, and it was impossible that I came from nothing... of course, it pains me

every time that there is a meeting of parents, it is only my mother who is attending and if not the assistant will do...”)

Lilo also shared that:

(... “I suffered bullying from my classmates and friends saying that I do not have a father, which he left us...”)

Hiro further supported the account by:

(“Sometimes they are saying something against me that I do not have parents, but then I said that how come that I am living now if I do not have parents, I am just ignoring it”)

Theme 2: Paglaho ng Alaala: Standing Anchored in the Ground

Based on the analysis done by the researchers an additional theme was made which is Paglaho ng Alaala: Standing Anchored in the Ground. This theme is divided into three sub-themes: (1): Blaming Him (2): Fear to be left out and (3): Emotional Support. This theme shows how their situation affects their faith and emotional state.

Harry shared how his situation affected his faith:

(“...I had so much hatred to God when I was a child, when these painful things in life happened to me, asking why He gave me this life, I blamed him for everything that happened...”)

Cinderella further shared that:

(“....Honestly, I blamed God first, maybe because I am just a human and there was some point that even if you have so much faith in Him, you will blame Him because they said He created everything....”)

The faith of this orphaned child develops into their fear and projection towards God. This leads to the discovery of the second sub concept of anxious thoughts, and this is how life gave them uneasiness and fear of the unknown. Cinderella stated that:

“I am having a feeling of being left out, and I do not like the feeling of being left by someone that’s why I make ways to be noticed”)

Similar to *Lilo*:

“...I have many fears, like what if I lose my mother, that there is someone important to me that I will also lose, that I do not want to happen even if I know that it will...”

The participants aimed to comfort themselves, with the help of others despite their challenges. The third subconcept is coping strategies. *Cinderella* shared that:

“...I imagine something because, for me, imagination is my most family and best friend because it can make me happy, I became happy because of my imagination...”

Lilo further shared that:

“...Yes, my friends and when my father died I had a boyfriend he was the one whom I leaned on...”

Theme 3: Bakas ng Nakalipas: A choice to Move Forward

Analysis of the narratives lead to the presented theme: *Bakas ng Nakalipas*: A choice to Move Forward. Four sub-concepts established under this theme: (1): Mistaken Thoughts (2): Lessons from the Aftermath (3): Moving on through acceptance and forgiveness and (4) Chasing Dreams. This theme shows how the participant’s experience affects their decision-making from the past to the present time and for their future knowing the fact that they have no parents now to hold on. *Harry* shared his thoughts:

“When she was gone, that time it flashed back to me how important she is to me. I thought I could live my life alone, that is how I felt but then I thought wrong, it is difficult now that she’s gone...”

Lilo also shared her memory:

(“...Back then I prayed for my father, ‘I wish that you die’ (crying)... that is how wrong I was to him. However, now, that he is dead. I wish that he be in good condition...”)

Harry remembering his past said that:

(“...Give importance, love yourself first before you turn into other people, and love your parents as long as they are there... because if they were gone that is only when you will realize their importance in our life, as a person, as a child...”)

Lessons in life after the problems and challenges of orphaned children affect their present perception about life. *Batang Simbahan* shared her lessons in life that:

(“...Learn how to appreciate the people around you, all the people who love you, all the people that God gave you. You will only realize it when they are gone.”)

Lilo also told that:

(“I learned to forgive. I learned that if there is a person who made a mistake, I forgive them. I had a deep grudge against my father and forgave him only when he was already nearing death. I learned a lesson that you do not need to take too long to forgive a person, all you need to do is understand him and then forgive him...”)

Moving on is the only way that they can accept the fact that they are already orphan and forget the hardships of their situation. *Harry* shared how he had moved on and quoted that:

(“...You will not blame her because of what she showed me and expressed, but then like other people said “No matter what I do, she is my mother” She is, she is the one who raised me no matter what. I accept the truth whatever that is because that will prevent my freedom or be firm if I would not accept the truth...”)

Also, *Lilo* pointed out that:

(“... When he died, when he was still in, in the morgue, I said, “Just be alive I will accept you even I am the one who will take care of you.” The feeling that...you want to make up with the lost chances with him, but then there is nothing you can do now because it is already there, and all you have to do is accept it. I accept that he is gone because if I do not, I will only make myself suffer...”)

After all the trials that came their way, they still hold in their heart big dreams for their future.

Harry told his dream that:

(“...Finish my studies, have a good job, to save money, of course, I also want to build my own house. I do not want other people to experience what I have been through. I want to have a simple life even if it is not that prosperous but then a complete family that my future child will experience the love of a whole and complete family which I did not experience...”)

Cinderella supported the account by:

(“...Because for me, my success in life would not be a true success if the family would not be involved because as what other say, ‘family matters the most’...”)

Lilo executed her dreams by:

(“...I only dream ... that when the time came that I will be alone and my siblings, of course, will have their own family too, I dream that I will not be the same. My future family would not be the same as the family I grew up, that is all...”)

Together with them, *Hiro* shared his only dream for the future by:

(“... Yes, until I finish to be able to graduate, as long as I will acquire a job so I can help the poor people for them not to get hungry. Moreover, then I will help to take good care of the children here...”)

CONCLUSIONS

The participants displayed courage that they were capable of overcoming their challenges in life and also in achieving their goals no matter what the odds are. They were willing to sacrifice their happiness for the sake of their remaining loved ones.

The symbolic representation of the life of the orphans is a stumbled bicycle in the midst of a different path. The bicycle represented the condition of the orphans. They are stumbling upon because of the absence of a parent who should be holding their hand and guiding them throughout their journey. Different paths are there, some are easier to find, some are already open while some are not, and it is a matter of choice, a choice to choose the path to take.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The findings of this phenomenological inquiry may be best translated to various media of communication for awareness of the experiences of orphans in the care of the DSWD. Social media may be used to campaign for soliciting help for the educational needs of these orphans since it may reach a larger audience. The results must also be echoed to the different professional organizations related to caring for these vulnerable children, especially during their childhood development period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following implications were derived based on the findings that emerged and the insights gathered through the process of reflective analysis: Inspire other orphans or even abandoned children through the experiences of the participants that they may serve as testimonial speaker during seminars and others; addition of trained social workers to have a further understanding of the children inside the orphanage; conduct a monthly assessment of the experiences of children in the orphanage to address the needs of the children; education should be a priority in choosing projects concerning the orphans; educating the public including the government and non-government organizations through information dissemination regarding the needs of the orphans so that it may be promptly addressed; and, guidance and support from social workers and psychologists are needed to develop positive coping mechanisms during the crucial period of child development.

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