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FEATURE

**Lived Experiences of International
Male Married Single Students**

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Abstract. *The Republic of the Philippines is attracting more and more international students, especially in tertiary institutions. People have realized that the Philippines has high quality education at an affordable cost. Consequently, the increase in the population of international students is evident in the Philippines. One unnoticeable group of international students that is creating a new phenomenon is the married singles, that is, married international students living in a foreign country without their families. Based on the accounts of two focus groups and eight individual interviews of male married singles, this phenomenological study explored factors that lead to married single life of international students, the impact of such a life on the students' wellbeing and their academic performance, the effect on their families, and the ways they cope with this life during the course of their studies. The findings demonstrate that the financial challenges are the major cause of the phenomenon of married singles in the Philippines. Both positive and negative consequences were seen on the academic performance of married single students while only negative results were reported on their wellbeing.*

Keywords: Married singles, international students, university, Philippines, phenomenology, wellbeing, education

Introduction

Globalization, with its far-reaching arms, has pushed people into different directions for various reasons. With exponential advancement in technology, knowledge, communication, and means of transportation, the world has indeed become a global village. People move around the world in the pursuit of happiness, fulfillment, or enjoyment in personal, family, or professional life.

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Students are no longer bound to study in their own hometown, city, country, or even continent. Educational leaders are no longer afraid of the internationalization of their institutions. Ethnic, racial, religious, or cultural diversity is now viewed as a strength rather than a threat, as traditionally believed decades ago. Today there are over 20,000 international students in the Philippines. This increasing influx of international students is creating a new opportunity for research that may not have been so strong a decade or two ago.

One phenomenon is slowly developing. No one seems to worry much about it because it may not be statistically significant; however, it is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored. It is affecting men, women, and children from different countries. Although it may have some lasting positive effect, it causes pain in families and if not well handled, it can actually ruin some families. It is a silent phenomenon that can also be called a silent emotional killer. This is the phenomenon of international married singles—international students who are married but study in a foreign country without their families.

Review of the Literature

Literature is significantly limited on the issues of married single students. This study may be one of the rare few available trying to explore the lived experiences of married singles. Therefore, the literature briefly synthesized here, which was influential in the conceptual framework of this study, is from broader issues of international students in general.

Studies on the life of international students have documented quite a number of challenges that these students face while studying in foreign countries. Some have demonstrated that international students face different types of discrimination (Church, 1982; Lee & Rice, 2007; Wa-Mbaleka & Gaikwad, 2013), among which Ryan and Twibell (2000), and Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson (2008) added the component of limited health services for international students. It is likely that married singles do face discrimination that other international students face, as found in some studies (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Lee & Rice, 2007; Matsuo et al., 2005), but, it is also possible that they face other types of discrimination.

Other studies have shown different types of causes of stress that international students face. These include, but are not limited to, adjusting to a different culture (Lee & Rice, 2007; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012), a new educational system (Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012), financial challenges (Sherry et al., 2010; Yeh & Inose, 2003), communication struggles in a new language (Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012); culture shock (Sherry et al., 2010; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2005; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008); some level of depression (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007); some strong sense of stereotypes and prejudice against them

(Alazzi & Chiodo, 2006; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Frey & Roysircar, 2006); loss of old friends and challenges of making new ones (Berry & Sam, 2010; Trice, 2004; Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012); perceived lack of faculty support (Junious, Malecha, Tart, & Young, 2010); and a feeling of isolation and loneliness (Marx, 2001; O'Reilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010). These are just some of the several challenges that are part of the price that international students must pay to receive what they believe to be a higher quality of education at an affordable cost in a foreign country.

The present study draws from the foundation laid by Maslow (1943, 1954) in his work on the hierarchy of needs of human beings, a taxonomy that has been widely accepted in several fields, including the field of education. The third level of this hierarchy of needs, which includes love and a sense of belongingness, is believed to be important to achieve before esteem and self-actualization—the top of the pyramid—can be realized. When married single students leave their family behind, it is understood that this level of the pyramid is seriously compromised because the people who matter the most in their lives—their spouse and children—are now absent. Married single students live without their families for a good number of years. While this loss of love and belongingness may affect all international students, it likely has much more devastating consequences on the life of the married singles; thus, the need for this study.

Married single students likely deal with all issues that international students face in their studies abroad. They likely face all the issues synthesized above from research conducted with international students. Still, no known study at the time of this study focused solely on the lived experiences of married single students. It was the goal of this study to explore specific issues that are unique to male international students who live as married singles in foreign countries, using the case of the Philippines as the baseline study. It was the goal of this study to reveal challenges and benefits, if any, that are related to the married single life of international students in the Philippines. This study was conducted in the hope that both educators and students can make better decisions about the education of this specific population of international students.

One additional important point to remember in the available literature is that most studies were conducted in Australia, Europe, and North America. Rarely are studies conducted in Southeast Asia, where the current study was set. Yet, due to the affordable cost of higher education in this region, there is a considerable increase in the number of international students, including married single students. It is time for more studies to be conducted about the experiences of international married single students in this specific region.

This study was the result of a growing number of foreign married single students at one particular private higher education institution. Since this is a new

phenomenon, it provided an opportunity for research that can be a baseline study for better understanding of this specific group of international students. Although not much-explored in educational research, this phenomenon might exist in several countries.

Methodology

This study is an exploratory one, entering in the unknown world of married single international students studying in the Philippines. It came as a follow-up of a recent study completed on the feeling of isolation and loneliness of international students in the Philippines (Wa-Mbaleka & Joseph, Upcoming). In the analysis of that study, it became clear that married singles were facing challenges that were specific to them only. This unexpected finding drew my attention to explore this phenomenon further. Since the literature was scarce on married single international students, I decided to use personal experiences by talking with married singles to conduct the current study. This study explored factors that lead to the married single life of international students, the impact of such a life on the students' wellbeing and their academic performance, the effect on their families, and the ways they cope with this life during the course of their studies.

Research Design

The current study reports on data from the lived experiences of married singles who study in the Philippines. Because it is focused on the lived experiences of research participants, this qualitative study is based on the phenomenological research design (for discussion on phenomenology, see Creswell, 2012, 2013; Lichtman, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Lived experiences of married singles who study in the Philippines have not really been explored in general, and, given its impact, currently needs to be the goal of study in the Philippines.

When a topic is fairly new, research experts usually recommend the use of qualitative research approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2012, 2013; Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Sogunro, 2002). Such a study plays the role of generating important variables that can be used to produce more research in the future. The current study is likely to contribute variables that will provide ideas for future research with married single students in the Philippines and possibly in other countries. For this purpose, this study is an exploratory study.

Participants, Sampling and Setting

The eight participants in this study were all university students from seven different countries. For the purposes of their privacy, their countries and the school where they were studying during the time of the data collection are not revealed here. Additionally, all the actual names of the participants were replaced by "Participant" and an assigned identification number in the coding process of the data. Participants were all men. This was intentionally done for the sake of exploring this phenomenon from the perspective of men who live as married singles in the Philippines. They were all completing either master's or doctoral studies. All the participants were studying at private Christian universities in the Philippines. A similar study is in progress looking at the same issue from the women's perspective.

Data Collection

After the completion of the earlier study on the isolation of international students (Wa-Mbaleka & Joseph, Upcoming), I began with some informal meetings with some married singles trying to understand their lived experiences. The more informal discussions occurred, the clearer it became that a study was needed to understand, analyze, and synthesize thoughts on this phenomenon. The literature on this specific topic turned out to be extremely limited.

Recruitment was done both in-group and also on a personal level. Most were recruited through face-to-face invitation to the study. Only two were recruited via email. All voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. This study used written interviews to allow all participants to have enough time to think about the interview questions, a total of eight questions. They were each given two weeks to return the written interview responses. In addition to the eight individual interviews, some of the research participants took part in two focus groups. An audio-recorder was used while I was conducting the focus group sessions. Verbatim transcription of both recordings followed in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis

All the data were coded based on the four pre-established themes. Emergent categories under each theme were included in the final interpretation of the data. The results that are presented here are based on categories that had a frequency of more than three counts. This count was set to decide on the meaningful categories to be included in the analysis.

Results

The results of this study are presented based on the five pre-established themes. These include the factors that lead to married single life, the impact of this phenomenon on the students' wellbeing and on their academic performance, the effects on their family, and coping strategies that students use throughout their studies in the Philippines. One theme emerged, that of summative evaluation of the phenomenon of the married single life.

Theme 1: Factors Leading to Married Single Life

The first step in this study was to try to understand why men would decide to leave their families in their home country to come to the Philippines for studies. At least from commonsense approach it can be seen that this must be a very difficult decision to make. Some may think of these married singles as irresponsible men. This specific aspect of the study helps understand the motives behind making such a difficult decision. As indicated in the data, this decision was difficult for all the participants.

Results showed that the main reason why they decide to leave their families for their studies is the limited financial resources. All the participants indicated finance as the major reason why they left their families behind. This is evident in the fact that most of the participants were self-sponsored, and only two of them were partially sponsored. All of them indicated that this decision, as hard as it was for them and their families, was the best approach to access quality higher education and prepare for a better future for themselves, their own families, communities, or the organizations where they worked prior to their studies.

Theme 2: Impact on Students' Wellbeing

The first negative impact on the married single student's wellbeing is the painful separation that they experience when they make the decision and when they actually leave their families. According to all the participants, the first months away from the family are the most difficult ones. After the first few months, the mind of these students is only on completing their studies as fast as possible and leaving so that they can be reunited with their families.

Sometimes, these students become sick. Some are sick because of the constant loneliness that they experience, the lack of balanced nutrition (because some come from cultures where their wives are in charge of this aspect of the family), and lack of comfort when they are discouraged, among many others. Additionally, homesickness is a problem they face on a regular basis. Two students also indicated the challenge they face to remain faithful to their spouses in their married single life. These two believe that their married single life is a real test of their love for their wives.

About half of the participants indicated that they battled the feeling of irresponsibility towards their families. They feel that they have failed in being the provider that the family expects from the man of the house. Despite that feeling, half of the participants have a way of comforting themselves, as echoed in Participant 3's statement, "the commitment to our future generation calls us sometimes to make sacrifices... So the decision makes me unhappy often but the future rewards comfort my soul."

The only positive aspect of their wellbeing indicated by 75% of the participants was that their married single life has become a faith-building experience. They indicated that they have relied much more on God than they had ever done before. They seem to have recognized their helplessness and surrendered to an Almighty God who alone can see them through in this difficult situation. This has contributed to their resilience in and commitment to the completion of their studies.

Theme 3: Impact on Students' Academic Performance

When asked about how the married single life has affected their academic performance, the answers were diverse. One of the eight felt that it did not make any difference. Three indicated that it has a positive effect for two reasons. First, it has pushed them to work even harder and faster in their studies for the sake of honoring their family. They feel that since they left their families, they need to honor them by successfully and efficiently completing their studies. Second, they believe that limited disturbance from their children has had a positive impact on academic performance. In their apartments, these students feel that, in the absence of their families, they can focus on their studies without disturbance from their children.

Half of the participants believed that the absence of their families has had a negative impact on their academic performance. These four participants gave two major reasons. First, they lack needed support from their family members. When they are down emotionally, they do not have anyone to comfort or encourage them to continue working. Additionally, the constant thought about the wellbeing of their families does not allow the married single students to focus effectively on the psychological activity of the academic challenges. These participants believe that they would be performing much better academically had their families joined them physically in their academic pursuit. This finding is in line with Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation.

Theme 4: Effect on Students' Families

Married single life has a negative effect on the student's families. At the time of separation, all participants indicated experiencing tremendous emotional pain with their family members. They all recalled that it was a painful decision to make but that it had to be done for the sake of a better future. Obviously, all of them believed that education is the best key to socio-economic mobility, as discussed in Gollnick and Chinn (2009).

Another negative aspect is that of the children's emotional wellbeing. Participant 1 stated, "My absence, I believe, has impacted negatively on my family back home. I could sense it from our telephone conversation. According to my wife, my children sometimes cry because they do not see me." Children are emotionally affected. Additionally, if they are at an early age, they spend quite a number of years without a father figure, something that could potentially affect their academic performance (Vandamme & Schwartz, 1985), their personal identity and many other aspects of their development (Allen & Daly, 2002).

The last negative impact on the families that emerged from the interviews was the potential influence on family ties. According to three participants, when the wife, left alone with the children, struggles to provide the needs of the whole family (when the husband basically cannot provide anything), this can challenge family ties. As a result of experiencing this frustration from the wife, the married single student can develop a strong sense of uselessness, irresponsibility, and resentment toward his studies. All this goes on without any significant guidance from the schools where these participants study.

One important experience that three participants indicated in the interviews was that of their wives developing strong leadership skills. The positive aspect of this experience is that, as long as the wife has strong leadership skills in the house, children are likely to follow the right path when they make decisions. On the other hand, this development of strong leadership skills by women can create fear in the male married single students. They sometimes fear losing "control" or leadership in their family when they are done with their studies.

Theme 5: Coping Strategies

Despite the challenges, most participants seemed to be coping fairly well with this phenomenon of married single life. They primarily used four major coping strategies. These included communicating regularly with their families by email or on Skype, praying more, taking heavier loads so that academic completion can be achieved sooner, and spending time with other married single students. The latter is based on the fact that such students understand each other well and can therefore comfort one another.

Emerging Theme: Summative Evaluation of the Phenomenon

After about three interviews, one theme began to emerge: that of the evaluation of the phenomenon of the married single life. Participants evaluated themselves and thought about prospective students who might be planning to leave their families. Despite the challenges of the married single life, six out of eight participants believed that their studies were worth the painful decision that they took to leave their families. Two said that it was not worth it and that sometimes they thought of dropping from school and go home to their families.

When asked if they would encourage prospective students to leave their families if they were in similar situations, the opinion changed. Only one of eight participants stated that he would recommend other prospective students do the same. Two indicated that they would present all the facts on married single life to prospective students and ask them to make their own decision. Five of them indicated that they would not recommend married single life to prospective students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The data in this study present a few lessons from factors, effects, and coping strategies associated with married single life of international students in the Philippines. First, due to financial challenges, some students have to leave their families behind to further their education. This situation creates a stressful and challenging life for them. This type of life pushes these students to focus primarily on academic program completion rather than on meaningful, deep learning. Despite these challenges, married single students believe that their education will improve their future professional, personal, and family life.

In general, the absence of the family has primarily a negative impact on married single student academic performance and wellbeing. It all starts with a very painful separation from loved ones. The negative effect of an absent father is also felt in the family that is left behind. While the coping strategies that the research participants have used so far seem to work for them, these strategies are limited in number. Some need exists to expand the repertoire of the coping strategies.

To increase the effectiveness in coping with married single life, colleges and universities in the Philippines with a considerable number of married single students (more than five) should consider developing some sort of orientation to new married single students. While this study was primarily on international students, who probably feel the phenomenon more than national students, such an orientation could be offered and may be beneficial to national married single students as well.

In a few interviews, participants indicated that it is really helpful to get together with other married single students. It might be a positive approach to have an organized system of getting such students together on a regular basis. A small attempt with this strategy at my university proved very beneficial over a number of months during which I organized such meetings on a monthly basis.

Some higher education institutions have a policy on how frequently students are given feedback from their thesis or dissertation committee members. Faculty assigned to married single students need to be even more supportive by providing timely constructive feedback so that the writing process can be more efficient. Such support will encourage such students to complete their studies faster. Most of these students have no means of going home on vacation from time to time to visit their families. Some have to stay four or more years to complete their graduate and doctoral studies. Taking this fact into consideration can help to motivate faculty and administrators to hasten the completion of the studies of students in this category.

Educational leaders should be more generous in allocating scholarships to such students. Some of them struggle to meet even the fundamental needs of life because they prioritize paying their tuition fees over any other need. Additionally, having a department with the responsibility to regularly assess the needs of such students could help improve the support that is given to them. Educators and educational leaders must treat these students as another group of learners with special needs that are not common to other students. For this reason, special resources must be allocated and practical steps taken in assessing and meeting their needs.

At the completion of their studies, married single students need to complete some training about the reintegration process. With all the stress and emotional pain that they have experienced abroad over a number of years, and with the fact that life may have certainly changed at home during their absence, they will likely need to re-adjust to the new life. Without proper preparation, reintegration can be another serious challenge over the ensuing first few months or years.

The findings of this study call for further research on four fronts. The first one should focus on the phenomenon as expressed in the accounts of lived experiences of the wives and children of the married single students. Second, research should be conducted on the long-term effect of the phenomenon of married single life on their professional, personal, and family life a number of years after the completion of the degree. After the study of the lived experiences of female international students has been completed, a comparative study should be done to analyze how similarly or differently male and female married singles experience their studies in the Philippines and in other countries.

Last, as more research providing a better understanding of this phenomenon become available, variables should be developed for quantitative studies.

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