



Filipino Working Adolescents' Conceptions of Work

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INTRODUCTION

The adolescent, already a son/daughter, sibling, student, and friend, sometimes finds yet another role foisted upon him- or herself that of the worker. A National Youth Commission survey estimated that the number of so-called “working youth” in the Philippines in 2001 was approximately 12,000,000 (NYC, 2001) and growing. The present study is concerned with these working adolescents and their conceptions of their work: the meaning of work as these young ones see it, the circumstances that drive them to seek a role transition to worker that is typically reserved for adulthood (Arnett, 2001), and the contributions of work to their young lives, both the beneficial and the detrimental.

Current models that attempt to explain and model the interaction between one's work and one's self are often grounded on data derived from middle class participants in Western nations (Blustein, 2001; Richardson, 1993; Savickas, 1993). These are substantial differences between the Western context and the local context that necessitate a grounded look at the Filipino working adolescent. For instance, research on adolescents in a Western city show that they possess independent self-construals, whereas these are both independent and interdependent among urban Filipino adolescents (Natividad, 2001). Furthermore, many of the Filipino working adolescents have a dearth of socio-economic resources.

The Filipino adolescent as worker experiences conflict with the other roles that the adolescent typically bears (Lee, Nadado, & Tan, 2005). One of these major sets of roles are the roles imbibed as a family member, including son/daughter, sibling, and possibly others as the case may be. In general, the family exerts a tremendous influence over the goal and identity structure of the Filipino (Miralao, 1997). Within the context of

work, there is evidence that one's family context has a strong effect on their purpose, values, and attitudes about work (Galambos and Sears, 1998). Furthermore, the families of these adolescents contribute to their reasons for working. Chavez and his associates (2004) mentioned that the family of the youth may encourage his/her conception of work in such a way that fosters preference for the external outcomes of the work (i.e. money) greater than that for the internal outcomes of work (i.e. fulfillment, intrinsic motivation). The family also exerts a pull as the adolescent's major agent of socialization. Indeed, one's orientation to work is one of the products of socialization that starts well before an individual enters the workplace or even formal schooling (Feij, 1998; Feldman, 1989; Hall, 1987; Vangelisti, 1988; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979 as cited in Levin & Hoffner, 2006). Hence, given this connection between an adolescent's conception of work and his/her family, it can be stated that work is heavily shaped by one's familial influence.

Another key role typically played by the Filipino adolescent is that of student. In the study of McCann Erickson (2006), they highlighted the fact the youth of today are making more time and are more devoted for their studies compared to five years ago. They added that the present teens are more determined to finish their studies since they believe that it is their passport to a better life. Pragmatism is the new idealism of the youth. The study mentioned that the youth nowadays are willing to dream of a better future for themselves and their family, and will go wherever this dream takes them. Indeed, studies on Filipino urban adolescents have found that they are optimistic about their futures (Natividad, 2001). They will do whatever it takes including the pursuit of alternative career paths to make this dream come true. These were supported by data which showed that their average time reading and extent of accomplishing school requirements increased. In terms of the preferred courses, nursing is the top choice of the youth nowadays across the different social

classes. This is followed by computer science courses in classes A to C except for D. Respondents from class D selected education as their second preferred choice.

Since both education and work are given value as roles the adolescent plays, both requiring great expenditure of time and effort, these two roles clash and conflict (Santos & Vicencio, 1988). These conflicts tend to weaken school performance as well (Eledia & Gonzales, 2005). The main cause of conflict is often the workload (Lee, Nadado, & Tan, 2005). This study showed that adolescents cope with the conflict through role redefinition (reprioritizing other roles), personal role redefinition (optimism and self-encouragement), and reactive role behavior (making greater efforts to fulfill the other roles). These are often executed through improved time management, improved personal organization, and improved health management habits.

It is in this light that this research aims to find out how today's working adolescents view and conceive of workits meanings, reasons, and contributions across rural and urban regions of study.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was utilized in identifying the meanings, reasons and contributions of work in the lives of adolescents. The Focus Group Discussions (FGD) conducted with the Filipino adolescents allow for in-depth sharing of ideas, thoughts and feelings about work.

Participants

The study consisted of 23 adolescents. There were twelve participants from the rural area and eleven participants from the urban area. The

participants for the study in the four focus group discussions were adolescents with an age range of 13-20. Most respondents from the urban area are working students. They are currently studying in a university in Pampanga. These students were either working as student aides in their school or were working in other places outside the school. Some of them worked in fast food chains while some worked in computer shops. In the rural area, the respondents were working as garbage boys or mangangalakal. The researchers employed purposive sampling for the study. The participant should be aged 13-20 and at the same currently working. The researchers made arrangements with one faculty from the university who organized the four focus group discussions (FGDs) to gather participants who were willing to participate in the study.

Procedures

Data Collection. Four FGDs were conducted for the study. There were two FGDs each held for the rural and urban category. The FGD had a moderator or a facilitator and a documentor. According to Flick (2006), the moderator introduces the questions and steers the discussion towards a deepening of it. He also asks provocative questions to advance the focus group discussion. On the other hand, the documentor observed the interactions and took down notes about the behaviors of the participants during the FGD.

The focus group discussions started with an introduction of all the members of the group. Flick (2006) stated that a short introduction of members is a part of warming up to prepare them for the discussion. During this phase, it is also important for the facilitator to emphasize the common ground of the members in order to facilitate or reinforce the community (Flick 2006). After this phase, the facilitator started the discussion with a very general question focusing on their definitions of

work. Ano ang kahulugan ng trabaho para sa iyo? (What is your definition of work?). After obtaining answers from each participant for the main question, the following questions were also asked: a) anu-ano ang mga dahilan kung bakit ka nagtatrabaho? (What are your reasons for working?) b) anu-ano ang mga positibong epekto ng iyong pagtatrabaho sa iba't ibang aspeto ng iyong buhay na gaya ng relasyon sa iyong pamilya, relasyon mo sa mga kaibigan at komunidad? (What are the positive things that you get from work in the different aspects of your life such as your family, relationships, community)? c) anu-ano ang mga negatibong epekto ng iyong pagtatrabaho sa iba't ibang aspeto ng iyong buhay na gaya ng relasyon sa iyong pamilya, relasyon mo sa mga kaibigan at komunidad? (What are the negative things that you get from your work in the different aspects of your life family, relationships, community)? Varied viewpoints of the respondents were elicited and probed. Towards the end of the discussion, participants were given the opportunity to deliberate on the issues raised during the FGD, as well as to react to and comment on any concerns they might have regarding the process. Finally, respondents were thanked and given tokens of appreciation for their participation.

Data Analysis. Qualitative content analysis was utilized on the data of the study. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Codes and categories were generated from the transcribed discussions with the help of In-vivo and were later used to identify larger sets of recurring themes. Coding was done independently by each member of the research team, after which it was checked, refined and operationally defined by the whole group. Codes were then grouped into categories that are mutually exclusive. Validity was established through an auditing process, which involved checking data-gathering and analytical procedures by another faculty member.

RESULTS

The findings of the present study are organized according to the four research problems. Codes were collected from the transcript of the focus group discussion and culled into overarching themes per research problem. Themes are compared and contrasted across urban and rural samples, and are then presented in italics as either shared by both rural and urban samples or as peculiar to one group.

Meaning of Work

Sustenance. Both urban and rural participants defined work as quite simply what sustains the adolescents and their families. Basically, adolescents work to earn not only for themselves but also for other people. In the words of one rural participant, *Para sa akin yung trabaho... kailangan ito para yung pamilya ay makaraos sa isang araw* (For me work is.. it is needed for the family so that it can get through each day). Another urban participant said that, *Nakatutulong siya hindi lang sa akin, pati sa family ko. Nakatulong siya sa amin* (It can help me as well as my family. It can also help us). There are, however, nuanced distinctions between sustenance in the rural setting and sustenance in the urban setting. One rural participant summed up his work as, *Para makabili ng pagkain namin... Pag wala po kaming ginawa, wala kaming kakainin* (We work so that we can buy our food. If we don't work, we don't have anything to eat.). The sustenance gained by the rural participants is necessary, but often not sufficient, for daily living. Essentially, for the rural respondent, work is survival. Such as the case of one rural participant who supports the family on his/her own, saying that, *walang trabaho yung magulang ko. ---Pag di ako nagtrabaho wala kaming makakain* (my parent does not work if I do not work we will not have anything to eat). In contradistinction, the urban participant is usually not under such dire straits, seeking to help add to the

family purse. Unlike those in the rural group who are forced to work to buy food for their families, urban adolescents work for their personal needs or other family members' needs such as education. One typical response from an urban respondent goes, *I have to establish my financial budget. And to help po my younger brother, especially my younger sister who is in her third year nursing in college po. And my younger brother po, who at a very young age of sixteen is married.* Another participant responded, *Sa akin, totally financial, kasi nga six kami magkakapatid, ako ang eldest, ngayon ayaw kong problemahin pa ng parents ko yung tuition ko* (For me, its totally financial, because we are six in the family and I am the eldest, I do not want to burden my parents with paying for my tuition).

In fact, one urban respondent in particular did not choose to work for sustenance, saying *kahit hindi ako magwork makakapag-aral naman ako. Pero kasi, gusto ng ate ko ma-experience ko yung na-experience niya* (even if I don't work, I can still study but my older sister wants me to experience what she experienced). Urban participants typically seek to support their family. The urban and rural data therefore point to sustenance as a shared theme, with nuanced differences in the level of sustenance across socioeconomic strata.

Urban

Opportunity for growth. Urban participants specifically perceive of work as being an opportunity to grow, learn, and develop skills necessary for work in earnest. One urban participant described it as, *Work means you know... being on time, tapos be responsible, uhh, atsaka yung ano... internal growth.* In agreement, another urban participant said that, *magkaroon ka ng more discipline sa sarili mo, time management* (you will have greater discipline with your self, a sense of time management). This conception of work as an opportunity for growth is peculiar to urban respondents and was not mentioned as conception of work among the rural respondents.

Reasons for Working

Financial Difficulty. Both urban and rural participants sought work as a means to relieve the financial difficulty experienced by the family. One rural participant said, *para po makakain kami sa tamang oras, yung tatlong beses sa isang araw. Kasi, minsan wala po kaming pagkain pag hindi kami nagtrabaho* (so that we can eat at the right time, three times a day because sometimes we do not have food to eat if we do not work). An urban participant also said, *kaya nag-work ako, ano... kasi financial problem, bale kulang talaga yung income namin* (the reason why I work is because of financial problems, because our income is really not sufficient). Both rural and urban participants experienced financial difficulty as an impetus to work.

Urban

Gaining Experience. When asked to provide their reasons for working, urban participants expressed a desire to gain experience. One urban participant chose to work, *para din magkaroon ako ng experience at my early age* (in order for me to have experience at my early age). Another also said, *At least pag graduate na talaga kami dun kami pupunta, alam na namin di ba, we already know how to play the game. That's our advantage dun sa iba* (at least when we are already graduates we will all know where we are going and will already know how to play the game). The desire to gain experience as reason for working only emerged as a theme for the urban participants.

Support Own Education. Several urban respondents declared that another reason for working was to support their ongoing education. One said that, *napakahalaga ng work kasi it can help especially dun sa financial support for your studies* (work is really important because it can help especially in the

financial support for studies). Another urban respondent affirmed a driving force to work as, *para masuportahan din ang studies ko* (to support my studies). This theme only emerged for urban respondents. None of the rural respondents were currently continuing with their education.

Positive Contributions of Work

Supporting Family. Both urban and rural participants expressed that one positive contribution of their work is that they are helping to support their family. One urban participant said, *sa family syempre less burden sa kanila kasi nakakapagbigay ako kahit papaano* (of course in the family, I am already less of a burden from them since I am already contributing whatever I can). A rural participant said, *nakakatulong kami sa pamilya namin. Malaking bagay na yan* (I can help in my family. That is already a big thing.). Supporting parents and siblings make positive contributions of work, which is a trait shared by both rural and urban participants.

Urban

Personal Development and Skill Building. One positive contribution of work that emerged specifically among the urban respondents was that they experienced personal growth and developed skills that they can use in their future jobs. Work provided an opportunity for them to develop themselves. Personal growth can be manifested in different ways. One respondent said, *Tapos yun, malaki na ang tulong ng work para sa akin, financially at saka para sa character ko as a person* (And then work helped me a lot financially, and also in building my character as a person). Another respondent noted that work helped him to develop his interpersonal skills, saying that, *natutunan ko kung paano mag-handle ng mga tao. kung papaano makipag-usap sa mga tao* (I learned how to handle people and how to talk to people). Another respondent highlighted that they were

able to learn to be practical in their life, for example in budgeting expenses, saying, *personality development, especially sa pagba-budget ng pera*. Ah, *matututunan mo din yung paano pahalagahan yung pera* (personality development, especially in learning how to budget money. You will also learn how to give importance to money). Yet another urban participant noted that his/her work teaches him/her skills that can be used in future jobs, saying, *Made-develop na yung skills na maaari mong gamitin sa future mo* (You can develop skills that you may use in your future).

Rural

Survival and Maintenance. When asked about the positive contributions of work to their lives, many rural respondents noted that their work was what put food on the family table. One rural respondent summed it up by saying, *Yung trabaho ay importante kasi yun ang kailangan natin sa araw-araw para makakain tayo* (Work is important because we need it so that we can eat everyday). Work for the rural group is for survival and maintenance of their lives. They have to work to buy their basic needs like food, and clothing. Other responses from the rural group participants involved other basic needs. One participant mentioned, *Para po may pambili kami ng damit* (So that there's enough money to buy clothes). Similarly, another participant said, *kaya ngayon may pera akong pambili so di na ako humihingi pa sa magulang ko ng pera* (nowadays I have money so I no longer ask for money from my parents). Through work, these young people can buy all the things they need for maintenance and survival as one rural participant said, *lahat ng kailangan namin ay nakukuha namin at nabibili* (we can have and buy everything that we need).

Negative Consequences of Work

Compromised Education. Both groups of participants lamented that their education was compromised by their work. One urban respondent explained, *Tapos, hindi ka nakakagawa ng assignments. Kapag major exam, nagka-cram ka. Talagang darating yung point na kailangan magkokopya ka, parang ganun, di ba?* (And then you cannot do assignments. If I have exams, I cram. It is inevitable that there will come a point when I have to copy). There did arise a notable difference between rural and urban participants most rural participants were not able to study while working, whereas urban participants experienced difficulty balancing their work and study roles, often to the detriment of their performance. For example, one rural participant said, *Gusto namin mag-aral pero wala kaming magawa dahil walang pera, dahil mahirap kami* (We want to study but we cannot do anything because we do not have money, because we are poor). In contrast, an urban participant said, *kasi yung time na dapat mag-aaral ka, halimbawa may test ka, mag-aaral ka ng leksyon... inano mo sa time na magtatrabaho ka syempre* (because the time that should be spent for studying, for example if you have a test, will of course be spent doing work instead). Though compromised education emerged for both urban and rural respondents, at least the urban respondents were all able to remain in school.

Compromised Self-fulfillment Tasks. Both groups of respondents mentioned that they were no longer able to engage in their personal self-fulfillment tasks. One rural respondent said, *di na po kami makapaglibot at makapaglaro. Kasi po puyat kami eh anong oras na kami umuuwi* (we cannot go out anymore and play because we always lack sleep because we always go home late). An urban respondent said, *Marami kasing beses na parang nawawalan ka ng time para sa sarili mo* (There are many instances when I no longer have time myself). Another urban respondent agreed, saying

that, *Kasi every Thursday, ahh prayer meeting namin yun. Eh ayun, wala ako every prayer meeting. Akala nila... akala nila nagiging unfaithful na ako* (Every Thursday we have a prayer meeting. I cannot attend. They're thinking that I am losing my faith). This disengagement from self-fulfillment tasks was evident in the statements of both urban and rural respondents.

Compromised Health. There were health and wellness concerns raised by both urban and rural participants. One urban participant noted that, *syempre pagod talaga yun, sobra ang payat ko talaga noon na anong tawag doon? Yung sobrang halata ang cheekbones ko, ganyan. Sobraang payat ko talaga* (of course it is really tiring, I was already so thin at that time. My cheekbones were so prominent. I was so thin.). Remarkably, the urban group expressed more health and wellness concerns across the board. One urban participant said, *Sa health wise, medyo naging weak lalo* (In terms of health, I felt even more weak.). In contrast, rural participants noted much milder concerns, like, *Nakaka stress, lumalabas yung mga ugat, nakakasira ng kutis, wala ng panahon sa sarili ganon* (It is stressful, my veins stick out, my complexion is flawed, and I don't have time for myself). Though this issue emerged as a negative contribution of work across both groups, it was manifested with greater magnitude among urban respondents.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative data obtained presents considerable similarity across socioeconomic status in the working adolescents' conceptions of work. Both groups conceive of work as a means of sustenance and survival regardless of socioeconomic status, though the meaning it takes on for the rural respondents was more extreme. Work is far more of a necessity to the rural respondents. Likewise, both groups chose to work because of

financial difficulty. One interesting similarity among both groups' reasons for working was its externality. There were virtually no participants who presented intrinsic reasons for work, their approach to work-seeking being largely reactive rather than proactive and agentic. Both groups also share one benefit of work being able to support their families, echoing Miralao's (1997) and Conaco, Jimenez, and Billedos' (2003) findings on the centrality of family in Filipino society. Lastly, both groups presented very similar negative consequences of work: compromised studies, compromised self-fulfillment behaviors, and compromised health, though the manifestations and magnitudes of these varied considerably across socioeconomic status. There are, therefore, a variety of experiences and conceptions of work that are shared by the urban and the rural, bound together by means of a shared cultural and economic zeitgeist.

There were, however, many remarkable peculiarities observed for a specific socioeconomic status. For instance, the urban youth gave meaning to work as an opportunity for growth, provided reasons for work such as gaining experience and supporting one's education, and articulated benefits of work such as personal development and skill building. These themes are conspicuously missing from the transcripts of the rural respondents. The single benefit claimed by the rural adolescents was that of survival. The rural adolescents appear to hold a maintenance perspective towards work, seeking from it only what is necessary and immediate. In contrast, the urban respondents sought a more meaningful growth perspective towards work, seeking to develop skills, maximize opportunities, and support one's education. The urban youth appear to have their vision set on the future, to draw from their work whatever they can prospectively bring to their future endeavors. Arguably, this apparent difference may have arisen from the sheer lack of resources and opportunities available to the rural adolescents. It is likely that the differences in perspective across urban and rural groups are drawn from a

pragmatic yet optimistic set of conceptions about the future, which can be expected to vary drastically across socioeconomic strata, explaining many of the findings that are exclusive to either rural or urban groups.

The theme “personal development and skill building” was not seen among the rural group, since for them work is a necessity and they do it to support themselves and their families. The rise of technology requires special skills and additional training, making poor students unable to compete in the global economy. The notion that each student has a career choice is now limited to students in the middle class. Among the poor, career choice is not what one is interested in, but rather implies access to available jobs that the family is in dire need of. Work no longer becomes a potential for self expression, but just a means to earn a living.

Clearly, the urban group manages to balance and provisionally resolve the role conflicts brought upon by work. The rural group, with less access to resources, undergoes role redefinition (Lee, Nadado, & Tan, 2005). They disengage from roles that they can no longer sustain, such as that of student. The urban group does seem to undergo something similar, yet manages to reprioritize roles rather than drop them altogether. Access to resources may serve as a kind of buffer that sustains and fuels role maintenance, just as it appears to do for identity exploration (Amarnani, Mendoza, & Yee, 2007).

Positive youth development in this regard initially appears to be much more likely upon access to sufficient socioeconomic resources. However, it is conceivable that both rural and urban groups are able to achieve positive youth development. Ideal, optimistic goal structures in the urban setting are likely to need a wider fund of skills and abilities to actualize their potentials in the workplace. In contrast, the rural youth with virtually no access to resources that are sufficient for further education may limit their

sights to more vocational careers and livelihoods that do not require the same wide fund of skills and abilities. In this light, both groups are able to achieve positive youth development, though that of the rural group may be actualized in a different, possibly constrained, manner. For example, one rural respondent said when asked how he feels about being able to help his family, “Masaya po. Kasi po nakakatulong ako sa pamilya ko at di napapabayaan yung mga kapatid ko, kumakain kami sa oras at me ibang bagay na rin. Masaya na ako at maipagmamalaki ko ang sarili ko” (I’m happy because I help my family and don’t neglect my siblings, we eat on time and other things. I have become happy and I can now be proud of myself). Many of the working adolescents, both urban and rural, find well-being in being able to support their families.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Economic realities, the priority of family, and societal value for education seem to be intertwined with the underlying conceptions of Filipino youth regarding work. The present findings show that working adolescents conceive of work as sources of sustenance and opportunities for growth. They choose to work in order to alleviate financial difficulty, foster work experience, and support their education when possible. It appears that their reasons for seeking work are largely external pointing to a reactive, non-agentive thrust for work seeking in adolescents. In turn, they are able to support their families, cultivate personal development and skill building. However, work also brings detriment to studies, self-fulfillment, and health.

The urban working adolescent maintains a growth-oriented perspective towards work and is able to prioritize and manage roles in order to withstand the strain of role conflict. In contrast, the rural working

adolescent holds a maintenance perspective towards work and redefines roles by dropping those that cannot be sustained. However, rural working adolescents can still achieve a constrained alternative positive development by supporting their families and themselves, thus bolstering their self-worth and possibly their self-efficacy. Indeed, positive youth development is still clearly within reach for the working adolescent. In a roundabout way, working may actually reinforce positive youth development among Filipino adolescents.

It ought be noted that the rural participants were, on average, younger than the urban participants, and any differences between both groups may possibly be accounted for by the age disparity, though all participants are adolescents. Future research should select participants of the same age ranges across groups of study. Furthermore, since there are clearly positive contributions of work to adolescent development, perhaps adolescent work programs can be developed that allow adolescents to boost their self-worth and self-efficacy by accomplishing work goals and providing for their family, yet being able to minimize role conflicts and pursue their education.

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