



WHISPERS OF LOSS: FILIPINO MOTHERS' UNTOLD JOURNEYS THROUGH INFANT GRIEF

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Abstract: *The study focused on the Lived experiences of Filipino bereaved mothers after infant deaths. The study made use of phenomenological research design. Moreover, a purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select participants who have experienced the loss of an infant within the past three years. Likewise, Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which offered the flexibility to explore various aspects of the participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. Furthermore, the study yielded six themes: (1) Illusion of Normalcy, (2) Fierce Storm Within, (3) Seeking Meaning Amidst Sorrow, (4) The Weight of Shadows, (5) Finding Harmony in Chaos and (6) Finding Light in the Darkness. Moreover, The study highlights the struggle between societal expectations and inner turmoil faced by bereaved mothers, emphasizing the importance of personalized assistance and empathy. It highlights the need for a more comprehensive approach to addressing loss and trauma in mothers, as societal norms often overlook their emotions and difficulties.*

Keywords: *Infant loss, Bereaved mothers, Phenomenology*

Introduction

One of the most profound and terrible events a mother may go through is the death of her infant. Within Filipino society, where family ties are highly prized (Canque et. al., 2019; Reyes et. al., 2023), and children are revered as blessings (Derasin et. al, 2022; Derasin and Derasin, 2024) the loss of a child can be very taxing. Due in great part to cultural standards and society's expectations, the emotional, psychological, and social effects of child death on Filipino moms remain a delicate subject that is typically left quiet. This silence can lead to feelings of isolation and shame for mothers who are grieving the loss of their child. It is important for Filipino society to provide support and understanding for these mothers during such a difficult time. This study aims to highlight the paths through loss experienced by Filipino moms who have lost an infant.

Though grieving is universal, cultural, societal, and financial elements greatly affect the experience of losing an infant. Research on international affairs have underlined the significant psychological effects of child death on mothers, including higher risk of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Boyle et al., 2015; Gold, 2007). But most of the current research is focused on Western settings, where cultural beliefs about loss and grieving vary greatly from those in the Philippines.



There is a scarcity of study in the Philippines regarding the distinct experiences of mothers who are mourning the death of an infant. Prior research has predominantly concentrated on the overall well-being of mothers (Ladion, 2017) and the rates of child mortality (Lansang & Aquino, 2019), while neglecting to address the individual and emotional impact that these losses have on mothers. The absence of research in this area indicates the want for a more intricate comprehension of how Filipino women manage their sorrow, particularly in a culture where conversations about death and bereavement are frequently evaded.

Moreover, the lack of discussion and acknowledgement of infant loss in the Philippines may be further intensified by societal norms that emphasize the need for endurance and fortitude, especially among mothers. Bereaved moms may have feelings of isolation and lack of support in their grieving process due to the absence of open discussions about grief and culturally sensitive support networks (Domingo et al., 2021). This study seeks to fill these gaps by creating a venue for Filipino moms to share their experiences, so enhancing our understanding of baby grief in the Philippine setting.

This study intends to provide insights that can guide culturally relevant treatments and support systems by analyzing the invisible paths of Filipino women through infant loss. The results will not only add to the body of research already in use on motherhood loss but also emphasize the need of considering cultural and social elements in the creation of efficient support mechanisms for bereaved women.

Methods and Materials

The study utilized a descriptive phenomenological design to delve into the lived experiences of Filipino mothers who have lost infants, employing a qualitative approach to gain deep insights into their grief processes and coping mechanisms. Moreover, a purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select participants who have experienced the loss of an infant within the past three years. This time frame is chosen to ensure that participants' experiences remain relatively fresh, allowing them to provide detailed and accurate accounts of their grief. Criteria for inclusion will be that participants must be Filipino mothers who have undergone such a loss, and who are willing to share their experiences in interviews. Efforts will be made to include a diverse range of participants in terms of socioeconomic status, geographic location, and other demographic factors to capture a broad spectrum of experiences.

Likewise, Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which offered the flexibility to explore various aspects of the participants' experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. The semi-structured format allows for open-ended questions that encourage participants to discuss their experiences in depth, while still providing a framework to guide the conversation. Interviews will be conducted in the participants' preferred languages—primarily Filipino or English—to ensure that they can express their thoughts and feelings most comfortably. Each interview will be audio-recorded with the consent of the participants and subsequently transcribed verbatim. This process ensures that the data captured is accurate and comprehensive.

Furthermore, A thematic method was used to examine the transcribed interviews. Data organization and coding will be aided with the NVivo program. By allowing systematic

classification of text and detection of recurrent themes, this program helps to manage and analyze qualitative data. Multiple readings of the transcripts will be part of the thematic study to guarantee a complete knowledge of the data and to expose important remarks and trends about grieving and coping mechanisms.

To assure the thoroughness and reliability of the results, the process of member verification will be utilized. This entails discussing initial findings with participants to validate the correctness and relevance of the reported experiences. Member checking is a method used to verify the interpretations made in a study and to guarantee that the participants' perspectives are appropriately reflected. In addition, the study will comply with ethical guidelines by gaining informed consent from all participants, maintaining the anonymity of their responses, and offering support resources to those experiencing chronic sorrow.

Ethical Considerations

The study will maintain ethical considerations throughout the entire research process. Prior to participation, all individuals will be required to provide informed consent, indicating their full comprehension of the study's objectives, their entitlement to withdraw at any time, and the intended utilization of their data. Strict confidentiality will be upheld, ensuring that any identifying information is anonymized in all reports and publications. Additionally, participants will receive information regarding bereavement support resources to aid them throughout and following their participation in the study.

Results

This section presents the data obtained through interviews and observations. Once the point of data saturation was reached, thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data collected through the use of coding.

Theme 1: Illusion of Normalcy

The first theme of the study sheds light on the complex emotional terrain where denial acts as a sentinel and a shield, profoundly and frequently unpredictably influencing the mourning process through a lens sensitive to the subtleties of mother bereavement.

Moreover, Denial often serves as a psychological defense mechanism, temporarily shielding the mother from the overwhelming emotions associated with the loss. This initial response allows her to protect herself from the intense pain and grief that can be too much to bear all at once.

“Oo hangtod karon uy. Uy pagkamatay sa among anak uy Lisod gihapon dawaton kay hangtod baya karun lisod gihapon dawaton niya. mayta sunod tuig mawala na pero di bayan a mawala gyud bisag unsaon” **(Yes, up to this point, The loss of our son remains very challenging to come to terms with, as it continues to be a struggle for her to fully accept. I anticipate that in the upcoming year, we will be able to embrace and acknowledge it)** - Participant-Husband

This resistance is often a manifestation of denial, a common defense mechanism where the mind protects itself from the unbearable pain of accepting the loss. By resisting the reality, the

mother can avoid confronting the full depth of her grief, allowing her to function and manage day-to-day responsibilities, at least temporarily.

Theme 2: Fierce Storm Within

The second theme explores the agonizing journey that grieving mothers take as they deal with the tragic deaths of their infants, with a special emphasis on the complex feeling of anger. This study reveals a noteworthy story of mother mourning, in which the intense intensity of rage and the denial of truth combine to shape the grieving process in incredibly complicated and intimate ways.

“Galagot sad kos doctor, pataka man lang. Wako kahibaw unsay gikamatyan sakong anak unya karon nganutana ko ninyo.ang gikamatyan sakong anak diay kay nalumos sa pagtotoy. Nya ang akong kuan ato nakakaon gyud to syag hugaw” (**I am infuriated with the doctor as he provided incorrect information on the cause of my child's demise. I am perplexed as to why my child passed away, and when questioning the doctor, he informed me that my child drowned while breastfeeding. However, I suspect that my child may have ingested something contaminated, leading to their untimely demise**). – Participant Mother 2

Ay kanang pasangilan kay kanang akong partner ako sad siya mapasanginlan kay ato tayma kay dili siya ingon mag lipay-lipay ato tayma while ako nagsakit ang hawak nagpa ultrasound nga kami ra duha sa akong ate I mean naa pod akong pag umangkon nga babaye nya kami ra nag kuan nagpa ultrasound siya siya didto nag kuan nag basket” (**Sometimes I blame my partner since I would go for ultrasounds with my sister during that period while he is simply playing basketball**). – Participant Mother 5

The mother's anger likely stems from a deep sense of injustice and despair. Seeing her husband enjoying life while she suffers through a difficult pregnancy would amplify feelings of isolation, frustration, and neglect. The heartbreak of losing her baby due to health complications possibly exacerbated by stress could intensify her resentment towards her husband's perceived lack of empathy or support during her ordeal.

Theme 3: Seeking Meaning Amidst Sorrow

The third theme delves deeply into the emotional journey of grieving women coping with the devastating death of their infants, with a particular emphasis on the complex process of bargaining as a major issue.

“Makaingon gyud ko uy. Maypa ako na lang namatay. Ang bata taas pa kaayu og kaugmaon. Nya ako nakaserbisyo na ko aning kalibutana. Mu dagan sa akong hunahuna lagi nga maypa ako na lng namatay. Kay ang bata baya taas pa kaayug kaugmaon uy... lima pa ka bulan”. (**I really mean it, you know. I wish I had just died. The child has a very bright future ahead. I have served in this world. I often think that it would have been**

better if I had just died. The child really has a long future ahead... just five more months). – Participant Husband

Theme 4: The Weight of Shadows

This theme centers on the overpowering sense of depression and explores the deep emotional journey of grieving moms coping with the tragic deaths of their infants. This investigation has a really moving story of mother mourning, in which the oppressive weight of sadness and reality denial combine to shape the grieving process in incredibly intricate and unique ways.

“na depressed gyud ko ato, pero gisultian ko sakong mama. Nga unsaon man nakuha ang bata. Nakuha man di gyud to para imo an-an para ila gyud to dawata nalang og unsay sakit.” **(I was really depressed about that, but my mom told me . How did the child get here? "Even if you got it, it's really not for you; just accept it as it is, no matter how painful)** – Participant mother 3

“Oo hilak lang ko. Hantod malubong na sya. Ni ana jud akong mama ato nga an-an ayaw pag hilak. Og imong anak I lubong ayaw hilaki ha. Ngano man man nganong diman nako hilakan man ? Sakit man sakong buot nga nakuha sya. Ana sya nga ayaw hilaki ang bata Kay maguol sad na sya. Oo ni ana akong mama. Di kuno nako sya hilakan Kay maguol.” **(I was crying, My mother was telling me that I should not cry because the spirit of my child would also be sad)** – Mother Participant 1

Theme 5: Finding Harmony in Chaos

This theme delves into the delicate emotional terrain of mother mourning, revealing acceptance as a resiliency-boosting light that challenges traditional ideas of coping and illuminates the depths of human courage in the wake of unfathomable loss.

“Actually, hangtod karon kay dili man jud ingon nga fully healed gyud no pero kanang kuan kanang maybe nadawat nako siya hinay hinay lang after a month kay wala naman gyoy gihapon koy choice wala naman koy mabuhay so mao to ako nalang siya gihinay hinay ug dawat” **(Currently, I am not completely healed. However, gradually, I have begun to embrace it over the course of a month, as I had no alternative and no other options available to me. Therefore, I have started to gently embrace it)** – Participant mother 2

Acceptance does not mean forgetting or moving on as if the loss never occurred, but rather bereaved mothers find a way to carry the memories and love forward, allowing them to shape and enrich one's life despite the pain. It's a journey that requires patience, self-compassion, and sometimes seeking support from others who have experienced similar losses.

Theme 6. Finding Light in the Darkness

This theme unveils the tender emotional landscape where hope emerges as a beacon of strength and renewal, challenging conventional understandings of coping and resilience in the wake of profound loss. Specifically, it delves into the hope that these mothers carry for the

possibility of having a child again, navigating the delicate balance between grief and the possibility of new beginnings.

“ganahan kayko mabuntis usab kay, imagina gud nabuntis ko og 9 months unya pag gawas sa bata wa jud ko kagunit niya nga buhi, kanang ganahan ka nga feeling nga magbuntis ka usab pero atleast kanang makakita na gyud kang bata na buhi nga kanang mukatawa nimo in ana wa jud ko kasuway sa feeling nga ing ana, na mukatawa nako or unsa kay paggunit nako ni ya lagom na kay siya, muto naka ana ko, kana kung ako lang pangutan-on ganahan ko nga mabuntis usab makakita na bata na healthy og buhi” **(I really want to get pregnant again because, just imagine. I got pregnant for 9 months, and when the baby was born, I couldn't hold him alive. It's like you want to experience that feeling of being pregnant again, but at least you want to see a baby alive who can smile at you. I've never experienced that feeling, like when a baby smiles at me or something. When I held him, he was already lifeless, and I thought to myself, if it were just me. I want to ask about getting pregnant again and having a healthy baby alive).**

Discussion

The study yielded that bereaved mothers initially use denial to cope with the infant loss. Neimeyer (2001) explained the utilization of denial and other coping strategies during the initial phases of grieving. This implies that denial allows individuals to maintain a feeling of normality and authority until they are ready to completely face the emotional burden of their loss. Moreover, Bonanno et al. (2004) explained that denial can be a common initial response, therapeutic interventions that encourage the processing of grief can help individuals move through denial and engage with their emotions more fully.

The study also uncovered that grieving mother experienced anger and resentment because of their infant's death, which subsequently led to emotions of isolation and alienation. According to Neimeyer, Klass, and Dennis (2014), anger and resentment are frequently experienced during the grieving process, generally due to the apparent injustice or lack of understanding surrounding the loss. These emotions might intensify feelings of isolation as individuals face difficulties in finding significance and assistance in their journey of grieving. Likewise, Grollman (2014) noted that the intensity of grief, including anger and resentment, can significantly impact a bereaved individual's social interactions and support networks.

Moreover, the bereaved mother also used bargaining as a coping mechanism which adds a significant dimension to our understanding of maternal grief. Stroebe and Schut (1999) explains that bargaining can be a way for individuals to manage their emotional distress by creating hypothetical scenarios where the loss could be undone or mitigated. Similarly, Boelen and Van den Hout (2008) discussed that bargaining can be an adaptive coping mechanism in the early stages of grief, helping individuals to manage their emotional instability.

Moreover, the study revealed that mothers who had lost their infants had depression because of the infant's death. Gong and Wang (2017) support these findings by detailing the persistence of depressive symptoms over time in mothers following an infant's death. Likewise, Kersting and Wagner (2012) noted both depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are prevalent among parents who have lost a child. Additionally, Zhao and Liao's (2018) meta-analysis compiles data from various research, providing strong evidence of a significant correlation between child loss and heightened maternal depression. This supports the idea that the psychological effects of losing a baby can be long-lasting.

Furthermore, the study revealed that after the grieving process, bereaved mother gradually accepts their circumstance. According to Bonanno et al. (2004), integrating loss into one's life and working toward acceptance are common steps in adaptive mourning. In a similar vein, Worden (2009) went into detail on the stages of grief, emphasizing that accepting the reality of the loss and moving on from it require realizing that the loss is inevitable and adjusting to a world without the departed, both of which are crucial for psychological recovery.

Finally, the study yielded the hope of bereaved mothers for the possibility of having a child again. Lichtenthal et al. (2010) discovered that the anticipation of future pregnancies can offer emotional solace and a feeling of direction for individuals dealing with the bereavement of a child. According to their research, hope can play a crucial role in the emotional healing process by providing a feeling of continuity and optimism, even in the midst of sadness. Cacciatore (2010) and Sandler et al. (2000), similarly discuss the significance of hope in the process of grief, highlighting that certain parents who have lost a child find comfort in the prospect of having another child in the future. This sense of hope can assist individuals in effectively coping with their sorrow and visualizing a future in which they can once again partake in the pleasures of nurturing children.

Conclusion

The study emphasizes the conflict between upholding societal appearances and the profound inner turmoil, the search for purpose, and the challenge of managing bereavement while carrying on with daily activities. Although depression is widespread, the study emphasizes the mothers' ability to bounce back and their eventual pursuit of hope and recovery. This study provides important observations about their experiences and emphasizes the importance of customized assistance and empathy. The results indicate that societal norms frequently obscure the intricate emotions and difficulties experienced by bereaved mothers, resulting in a deficiency of adequate support and understanding. By illuminating these neglected facets, the research advocates for a more empathetic and comprehensive approach to tackling loss and trauma in mothers.

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