Filipino working adolescents' conceptions of work

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Who is the Filipino working adolescent and where is he or she coming from? The present study seeks to determine these adolescents' conceptions of the meanings of, reasons for, and contributions to their work. Data is gathered from focus group discussion held with 11 rural- and 12 urban-based adolescents. Findings across rural and urban groups show that Filipino working adolescents give meaning to work as sustenance. They work because of financial difficulty. One positive benefit of work is being able to support one's family, while the negative contributions of work include compromised studies, compromised self-fulfillment, and compromised health. Rural adolescents approach work as a means to maintaining their survival and lifestyles, whereas urban adolescents approach work as a means to growth. Implications toward positive youth development are discussed and outlined.

Keywords: Filipino working adolescents, conceptions of work, focus group discussion, positive youth development

The adolescent, already a son/daughter, sibling, student, and friend, sometimes finds yet another role foisted upon him- or herself-that of the worker. This is not an isolated trend: a Social Weather Station survey has shown that as many as 30% of Filipino youth are employed, whether formally or otherwise (Sandoval, Mangahas, & Guerrero, 1998). The present study concerns 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.

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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). There 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. These differences in demographic and psychological variables (among other things) can inform differences in Filipino adolescents' conceptions of work and self that may not be predicated by the current corpus of research.

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 experienced 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 strong influence on their purpose, values, and attitudes about work (Galambos & Sears, 1998). Furthermore, the families of these adolescents contribute to their reasons for working. Chavez and his associates (2004) mention 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 pull as the adolescent's major agent of socialization. One's orientation to work is a product of socialization which starts well before an individual enters the workplace or even formal schooling (Hoffner, Levine, & Toohey, 2008; Jodl, Michael, Malanchuk, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2001; Christopherson, 1998). This link between adolescents' conceptions of work and their early life experiences affirms that conceptions of work are heavily shaped by familial influence.

Another key role typically played by the Filipino adolescent is that of student. In the study of McCann Erickson (2006), it shows that adolescents put more time and effort into their schoolwork than the adolescents they studied five years before. These adolescents are more determined to finish their studies since they believe that it is their passport to a better life, implying that pragmatism is the new idealism of the youth. The study also notes that adolescents nowadays are willing to dream of a better future for themselves and for their family. They are willing to 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. This trend manifests in view of presently preferred undergraduate degrees: nursing is now the top choice of adolescents across the different social classes (McCann Erickson, 2006). This is followed by computer science courses in classes A to C but not D. Respondents from class D select education as their second preferred choice.

In a recent study, as many as 90% of participants in a mini-survey in the People at Work section in the Philippine Daily Inquirer report that they were working students (Franco & Wells, 2007). Of these, 87% had completed their studies and nearly half had graduated on time. Some major concerns of these working students were finding a school-work balance (37%) and dealing with exhaustion and sleep deprivation (39%). On the other hand, some of their noted benefits included personality development/maturity (40%) and financially sustaining their families (35%).

Since both education and work are given value as roles the Filipino working adolescent plays, and both requiring great expenditure of time and effort, these two roles clash and conflict. The main cause of conflict is often the workload (Lee et al., 2005). This study shows 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 work-its meanings, reasons, and contributions across rural and urban regions of study.

METHOD

A qualitative approach was used to gather data. The focus group discussions (FGD) conducted with the respondents allowed for drawing their shared ideas, thoughts and feelings about work.

Participants

The study consisted of 23 adolescents. There were 12 participants from the rural area and 11 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 were working students. They were studying in a university in Pampanga. Some of these students were working as student aides in their school, others in fast food chains or in computer shops. In the rural area, the respondents were working as garbage boys or *mangangalakal* (vendors). The researchers employed purposive sampling for the study. The participant should be aged 13-20 and currently working. The researchers made arrangements with a teacher from the university who then organized the four focus group discussions to gather participants who were willing to participate in the study.

Procedures

Data Collection. Four focus group discussions were conducted for the study. There were two focus group discussions each held for the rural and urban category. The research team present at each FGD included a moderator and a documentor. According to Flick (2006), the moderator introduced the questions and steered the discussion towards a deepening of it. He also asked 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 was important for the facilitator also to emphasize the common ground of the members in order to facilitate or reinforce the community (Flick, 2006). After this phase, the facilitator focused on the main questions, first asking one and letting all participants have their say before proceeding to the next question. The questions asked were:

a. *Ano ang kahulugan ng trabaho para sa iyo?* (What is your definition of work?);

b. *Anu-ano ang mga rason bakit ka nagtatrabaho?* (What are your reasons for working?);

c. *Anu-ano ang mga positibong bagay ang nakukuha mo sa iyong trabaho sa iba't-ibang aspeto ng iyong buhay tulad sa pamilya, sa mga kaibigan, at sa komunidad?* (What are the positive things that you get from work in the different aspects of your life like in your family, relationships, community?); and

d. *Anu-ano ang mga negatibong bagay ang iyong nakukuha sa iyong trabaho sa iba't-ibang aspeto ng iyong buhay tulad sa iyong pamilya,*

mga kaibigan at sa 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 also probed as necessary. 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. The data obtained were subjected to qualitative data analysis. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim. Codes and categories were generated from the transcribed discussions and were later used to identify larger sets of recurring themes. Coding was independently done by each member of the research team; after which, the coding was checked, refined and operationally defined by the whole group. Codes were then grouped into categories. Validity was established through an auditing process by which the results gathered were corroborated by a qualified researcher who is not part of the research team.

RESULTS

The findings of the present study were 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 were 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 worked 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 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 were, however, nuanced distinctions between sustenance in the rural setting and sustenance in the urban setting. One rural participant

summed 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 do not work, we do not have anything to eat.). The sustenance gained by the rural participants was necessary, but often not sufficient, for daily living. Essentially, for the rural respondent, work was survival. Such as the case of one rural participant who supports the family on his/her own, said 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 was usually not under such dire straits, seeking to help add to the family purse. Unlike the rural group who were forced to work to buy food for their families, urban adolescents worked for their personal needs or needs of other family members like education. One typical response from an urban respondent went, "I have to establish my financial budget. And to help *po* my younger brother, especially my younger sister who is in her third year college of nursing *po*. And my younger brother *po*, who is at a very young age married at the age of sixteen." Another participant responded, *"Sa akin,* totally financial, *kase 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 my tuition).

In contrast, one urban respondent in particular, who did not choose to work for sustenance, said, *"kahit hindi ako mag*work *makakapag-aral naman ako. Pero kase, gusto ng ate ko ma-*experience *ko yung na-*experience *niya"* (even if I don't work, I can still study but I want to experience what my sibling experienced). Urban participants typically sought to support their family. The urban and rural data therefore pointed to sustenance as a shared theme with nuanced differences in the level of sustenance across socioeconomic strata.

Opportunity for growth. Urban participants specifically conceived of work as 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 more time with your self, time management). This conception of work as an opportunity for growth was peculiar to urban respondents and was not mentioned as conception of work for the rural respondents.

Reasons for Working

Financial difficulty. Both urban and rural participants sought work as a means to relieve financial difficulty experienced by the family. One rural participant said, *"para po makakain kami sa hustong oras, yung tatlong beses sa isang araw. Kasi, minsan wala po kaming pagkain pag hindi kami nagtrabaho"* (so that we can eat in 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 problem because our income is really not enough). Both rural and urban participants experienced financial difficulty as an impetus to work.

Gain 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 tayo dun tayo papunta, alam na natin di ba,* we know how to play the game already. That's our advantage *dun sa iba"* (at least when we are already graduates we will all go there and we already know how to play the game. That's our advantage over the others). 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 education as a driving force to work, *"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 their education.

Positive Contributions of Work

Support 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 kase magkano na lang ang binabayaran ko"* (of course in the family, I am not much of a burden since I am only paying a small amount). A rural participant said, *"nakakatulong kami sa pamilya namin. Malaking bagay*

na yun" (I can help in my family. That is already a big thing.). Supporting parents and siblings were positive contributions of work that are shared by both rural and urban participants.

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 to develop their selves. Personal growth could be manifested in different ways. One respondent said, "*Tapos yun, malaki na 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 for 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. Papano makipag-usap sa mga tao"* (I learned how to handle people and how to talk to people). Another respondent stressed that they were able to learn to be practical in their life for example in budgeting things, and said, "personality development, especially *sa pagba-*budget *ng pera. Ah, matututunan mo din yung paano pahalagahan yung pera"* (personality development, especially in budgeting of 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 your skills that you may use in your future).

Survival and maintenance. When asked about the positive contributions of work to their lives, many rural respondents noted that their work put food on the family table. One rural respondent summed it up with this, *"Yung trabaho ay importante kasi yung kailangan natin sa araw-araw para makakain tayo"* (Work is important because we need it so that we can eat every day). Work for the rural group was for survival and maintenance of their lives. They had to work to buy their basic needs like food, and clothing. Other responses from the rural group participants mentioned 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 I do not ask anymore from my parents). Through work, these young people could buy all the things they need for maintenance and survival, as one rural participant said, *"lahat ng kailangan natin ay nakukuha natin at nabibili"* (we can have and buy everything that we want).

Negative Contributions 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 talagang kailangan makakakopya ka"* (And then you cannot do assignments. If I have exams, I cram. It will also come to a point that I have to copy). There did arise a notable difference between rural and urban participants wherein 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, *"kase 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 you have a test, of course you will just spend it in your work). 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 kaming 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 lot of times that I do not have time for myself anymore.). Another urban respondent agreed, saying that, *"Kase yung 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 I am becoming unfaithful). This disengagement from self-fulfillment tasks arose 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, sobrang payat ko talaga noon na anong tawag doon? Yung sobrang halata ang cheekbones ko, ganyan. Sobrang payat ko*

talaga" (of course it is really tiring, I am already so thin during that time. My cheekbones are so prominent. I am 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 weak even more.). 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 skin gets damaged and I don't have time for myself). Though this issue emerged as a negative contribution of work across both groups, it manifested with greater magnitude among urban respondents.

DISCUSSION

The qualitative data obtained presented considerable similarity across groups in the working adolescents' conceptions of work (see Table 1). Both groups gave meaning to work as a means to sustenance and to survival

TABLE 1

Themes of work for urban, rural and both groups of respondents grouped according to category

Categories	Urban	Rural
Definition of Work	Sustenance	
	Opportunity for growth	
Reasons for Working	Financial difficulty	
	Gain experience	
	Support own education	
Positive Aspects of Work	Support family	
	Personal development	Survival and maintenance
Negative Aspects of Work	Compromised education	
	Compromised self-fulfillment tasks	
	Compromised health	

regardless of group, though the meaning it takes for the rural respondents was more extreme. Work was far more of a necessity to the rural respondent. Likewise, both groups chose to work because of their financial difficulty.

One interesting similarity among both groups reason 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 shared one benefit of work-being able to support one's family, echoing Miralao's (1997) and Gastardo-Conaco, Jimenez, and Billedos' (2003) findings on the centrality of family in Filipino society. Lastly, both groups presented very similar negative contributions of work: compromised studies, compromised self-fulfillment behaviors, and compromised health; though the manifestations and magnitudes of these varied considerably across socioeconomic status. There were, therefore, many common experiences and conceptions of work for both the urban and the rural respondents, tied together by means of a shared cultural and economic milieu.

There were, however, many remarkable findings that were peculiar to only rural or only urban respondents. For instance, the urban respondents gave meaning to work as an opportunity for growth, provided reasons for work like gaining experience and supporting one's education, articulated benefits of work like personal development and skill building, findings that converged with Franco and Wells' results (2007). These themes were conspicuously missing from the statements of the rural respondents. The single benefit claimed by the rural adolescents was that of survival. These rural adolescents appeared 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. These urban youth appeared to have their vision set on the future, to draw from their work whatever they could prospectively bring to their future endeavors. Arguably, this apparent difference may have arisen from the sheer lack of resources and opportunities for the rural adolescents.

The theme personal development and skill building was not seen in the rural group since they seemed to perceive work as a necessity, as a means to support themselves and their families. The rise of technology required special skills and additional training, making poor students unable to compete in the global economy. The notion that each student has a career choice was now limited to students in the middle class. Among the poor, career choice is not what one was interested in but access to available jobs that the family was in dire need of. Work became no longer a potential for self expression

but just a means to earn a living. In this manner, it may be that personal growth was not perceived as necessary for rural participants in the sort of jobs they hope to have later on, such that the observed lack of a personal growth orientation may represent not a deficiency but rather a contextually efficient and practical approach to work. It was thus proposed that the differences in perspective across urban and rural groups may be 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.

Clearly, the urban group managed to balance and provisionally resolve the role conflicts brought upon by work. Perhaps the rural group, with minimal access to resources, underwent role redefinition (Lee et al., 2005). They disengaged from roles that they can no longer sustain, such as that of student. The urban group did seem to undergo something similar, yet managed to reprioritize roles rather than drop them altogether. Access to resources may reduce the strain on these adolescents' roles.

Positive youth development in this regard initially appeared to be much more likely dependent upon access to sufficient socioeconomic resources. However, it was conceivable that both rural and urban groups were able to achieve positive youth development. Ideal, optimistic goal structures in the urban setting were likely to need a wider fund for 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 which do not require the same wide fund for skills and abilities. In this light, both groups were 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 yung bagay na yun Masaya na ko at maipagmamalaki ko na sa 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 be now proud of myself). Many of the working adolescents, both urban and rural, found 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 regarding work of

Filipino youth. 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 -agentic" 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 appears to maintain 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 may hold 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 to be noted that many of the working hypotheses put forth are propositions that can reasonably explain the findings in light of the data obtained. Nevertheless, these are not yet definitive explanations of why these findings were produced. The authors thus assert the need for converging research that can definitively support or lay bare the working hypotheses presently put forth.

It should also be noted that the rural participants are, 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 clearly are 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 be able to minimize role conflicts and pursue their education.

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