

The Psychosocial Costs of Post-Employment of Overseas Workers: A Research Agenda

ELENA L. SAMONTE*

This paper addresses the problem of psychosocial costs of employment of overseas workers by discussing the full cycle of employment (from pre-employment to post-employment) and the attendant psychosocial processes in each stage. It utilizes Homan's Equity Theory to discuss the risks involved. It underscores the costs involved in staying in the Philippines and how such costs tilt the balance in favor of the rewards from working abroad. Moreover, it proposes a research agenda that seeks to establish an empirically-based concept of psychosocial costs and identify its predictors.

Introduction

Examining the psychosocial costs of post-employment entails an analysis of the psychosocial processes involved in the phenomenon of overseas deployment. Three questions must be addressed: (1) What happens psychologically to migrant workers who work abroad? (2) What happens to those they leave behind? and (3) What happens to both parties when these workers return? For these questions to be answered, the discussion must trace the full cycle of overseas employment, from pre-employment, life during employment, to post-employment. Costs are already incurred even at the pre-employment stage. The discussion focuses on both the migrant workers and their families. The data upon which the discussion is based are taken from various researches on migrant workers. A review of the researches on migrant workers shows that research and documentation have focused on the following:

- (1) Pre-employment: motivations, problems with illegal recruitment;
- (2) During employment: problems regarding work conditions and adjustment to host country, sources of stress and coping mechanisms; and
- (3) Post-employment: level of satisfaction and assessment of overseas assignment, and reentry adjustment.

*Professor, Department of Psychology, College of Social Science and Philosophy, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.

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Pre-Employment Phase: Motivations

To understand the situation of the returning migrant workers, one has to start from the time they entertained the thought that working abroad is an option. A good number of the arguments against the recent selective ban on entertainers points to the inability of government to provide the jobs these people need. But studies show that the decision to migrate is not as simple as not having a job. A recent study on migrant workers in Japan showed that 62 percent were previously working (Samonte 1991). A study of the ILMS (1984) showed even higher statistics, with 74.2 percent of landbased workers having a work history of three years or more prior to their overseas contract. It was lower (41.4%) for seamen.

Needless to say, there are many other reasons. Elepano (1990) and Amante (1990) listed macroeconomic factors such as high unemployment rates¹, low wages and per capita GNP/income,² deteriorating economic conditions,³ scarcity of foreign exchange,⁴ and institutional policies such as those stated in the overseas contract worker program of the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration⁵ which push Filipinos to work abroad. Samonte (1990), on the other hand, cited personal and social factors such as sense of adventure and familial concern, the family being the center of a Filipino's life. A study by de Jong *et al.* (1986) revealed that family pressure by close relatives is the most important predictor in decisionmaking. Other important predictors are "being single and having money to move" (1986:51).

In a recent study conducted by Samonte from 1991-1992, most of the entertainers expressed their desire to help the family. Either directly or by virtue of example, majority of them were persuaded by a relative, friend or neighbor to work as entertainers. The decision then was not only influenced by one's family and friends, but was also positively received (Cruz 1989:33).

Furthermore, the *kuha* system⁶ plays a major role in decisionmaking. The study by de Jong *et al.* (1986) disclosed that the more relatives their respondents had in the host country, the more likely they were to move, especially if they had sought information about the immigration process. Having relatives who would support and help them find a job as well as a place to live is definitely a plus factor. In Germany, Holland and Japan, for instance, the Filipinas studied often had a relative somewhere in Europe (Samonte 1990), or in other parts of the world (Samonte 1991).

Lastly, older age and less education are also predictors of intentions to migrate. (Although the study basically focused on migrants, researchers should take note of these variables and test whether these are the same predictors for migrant workers.)

Other than family needs, what else prompts Filipinos to go abroad? As noted by Tharan (1989), "the desire to belong to the 'in' group of *balikbayans*" (returning

migrants) "or the *naka-abroad*" (a slang term which means that one has already gone abroad) is strong. It means attaining a certain status or prestige among village folks and countrymen as a whole. In other words, going abroad to work has become a value and, put in the balance, outweighs the potential risks and difficulties that could confront the worker.

There are various ways these risks are psychologically dealt with, such as:

- (1) Through *denial* (it won't happen to me);
- (2) Through *minimalization* (*ganyan talaga, makakaraos din*);
- (3) Through *rationalization* (I am doing this for my family, my parents, my children, etc.);
- (4) By *highlighting one's goals* (I will work until I can buy a house and lot, send the children/brothers and sisters to school, put up a business) (Cruz 1989; ILMS 1984; Samonte 1990 and 1991);
- (5) Through *magical thinking* (If I behave, nothing could go wrong); and
- (6) By having faith in God (God will take care of me).

By resorting to any or all of these, workers have managed to cross the rubicon and work abroad.

It must be emphasized that not all motivations are financial in nature. It was noted that "the women migrating do not belong to the poorest families in the respective labor-exporting countries" (Heyzer and Lycklama 1989:44). Other reasons were given such as: to assert oneself and one's freedom; to escape from problems like strict parents, uncaring husband, unsuccessful marriage; and to enhance personal growth, experience adventure, and face new challenges (Cruz 1989; Tharan 1989; Tornea and Habana 1989).

The decision to work abroad is, therefore, a result of an interplay of environmental factors (e.g. economic conditions), personal variables (e.g., sense of duty, sense of adventure, openness to new experiences) and social variables (e.g. family pressure, marital discord). This being the case, the needs of the migrant workers must not be the only ones addressed but also those of their immediate family and friends.

It is also clear that migrant workers' motives, as noted of sojourners (Furnham 1988:43), are more specific and goal-oriented. Definitely, utmost in their minds are tangible payoffs such as financial gains, prestige, and upward mobility.

The critical questions confronting both migrants and their families are: What are my expectations? What are my strengths and weaknesses? What skills do I need to learn while "X" is away? How well informed am I about the job, the working conditions, the host country? What am I giving up and what do I expect in return? Confronting these questions can somehow prepare the individuals concerned and cushion them from the blows that they may possibly encounter in living their new lives.

During Employment Phase

Assuming that these migrant workers manage to escape illegal recruitment and fake documentation, they still have to contend with paying back the large amount of money they borrowed to finance their travel expenses. Moreover, they have to function in a culture quite different from their own.

The number and variety of stresses and adjustments they must make must be underscored (Samonte 1990). On the emotional level, there is homesickness and loneliness, the social isolation due perhaps to an inability to speak the language, and the feeling of helplessness when faced with so many little difficulties in everyday living. Whereas before, it was a matter of routine going to the grocery, riding a bus, going to Church, etc., now, they have to start from square one (Furnham and Bochner 1982). Very much like a child that is faced with a whole new world, they have to learn simple phrases, learn to get from point A to point B, learn the customs of the host country, find a new set of friends, learn a different set of work ethics, deal with discrimination, face possible maltreatment and exploitation, and even adjust to the climactic changes. In short, they have to learn to function in their new environment at the soonest time possible. But unlike a child, they may not have loving caretakers much less the support group that can teach or even protect them.

Medel-Añonuevo *et al.* (1989) and Tornea and Habana (1989) provide long lists of woes of the Filipino *amah* (*yaya* or governess) and entertainers. Among them are low wages, underpayment, contract substitution, nonpayment of benefits and other fees, denying rest days and holidays, a list of prohibitions, inadequate protection, and sexual harassment. There are also workers whose jobs put them at risk such as the domestic help and the entertainers (Francisco 1989:158; Ohshima and Francis 1989; AWA 1988; CIIR 1987; David 1991). These workers are more likely to be exposed to situations which invite sexual overtures or even rape. Moreover, there are countries which have policies that are "racist and discriminating" (Medel-Añonuevo *et al.* 1989; AWA 1988). Singapore, for one, bars any Filipina domestic help from marrying a Singaporean while employed in that country.

Psychologically, then, for the first few months, migrant workers are constantly barraged with demands to adjust. They resort to various methods of coping, like learning the language, finding friends, forming Filipino organizations, praying, writing

letters, calling home, etc. and in time, manage to live through the duration of their contract. Furnham (1988) cites eight theories of sojourner adjustment, emphasizing the social skills approach.

More often than not, these workers deal immediately with the instrumental demands but may focus less on the affective and cognitive aspects. But these demands must also be addressed. That is, just as they learn to live without their family and friends, they also learn to care for a new set of friends. In an effort to deal with the feeling of helplessness and uncertainty, they also learn to be independent, cook their own food, do their own laundry, go to the movies without *making paalam* (asking permission). In short, they make decisions on their own without consulting someone else. In so doing, they answer the demands of the situation and change part of their lifestyle accordingly.

Similarly, the family left behind, i.e., "the vicarious migrants," is faced with a whole new life, a life without this significant person in the family. If married, the person left behind takes on the double role of mother and father to the children, learns to be more independent, and tries to deal with the consequent material wealth and change in status. All family members somehow try to work around the loneliness. Cruz (1989) notes that 28.2 percent of 305 respondents (wives or husbands of overseas workers) experienced positive changes in their lives such as increased self-esteem, freedom from financial worries, improved decisionmaking, strengthening the couple's relationship, personal growth, etc. The children learned some discipline, too (Cruz 1989:72). However, the costs were also along the same lines, in terms of loneliness (79%), strained relationship with partner (31.5%), and difficulties in family relationship/upbringing of children (40.7%).

Some of the psychological processes which migrant workers experience during this phase are:

- (1) *Denial of subjective impact.* Workers may consciously or unconsciously set feelings aside, their focus being on task efficiency and sheer survival in a foreign environment.
- (2) *A clash of values and roles.* The new culture may not recognize the Filipino indigenous values of *pakikisama* or *may kilala* (values characterized by strong personalism), but rather emphasizes the virtue of merit.
- (3) *Learning new personal and social skills.* Not only do they pick up a few words and phrases, they also learn the customs and ways of the host country and deal with the people accordingly. Likewise, they also learn how to live by themselves, away from their old support groups.

- (4) *Movement from a state of dissonance, ambiguity and confusion to one of consonance, clarity and order.* What was once strange and foreign has become familiar. Thus, a cognitive map of the area is devised so that they manage to find their way around, and somehow, they begin to fit into their new setting.
- (5) *Movement from anxiety to relief.* A feeling that they have more control of their environment and their lives now that they are away from home.

The critical questions for this phase in the cycle are: how do I handle the changes in my life? How do I try to bridge the gap between my world and that of the partner (family)? What values am I learning, changing, adopting? What personal and social changes are taking place?

Post-Employment Phase

Finally, it is time for the migrant worker to come home. It means reunification with family and reentry into Philippine society. As balikbayans, they acquire a new status not only with having more material wealth but also with the accompanying prestige as well. There are exceptions, though, such as the many victims of torture and exploitation. Their trauma and experience will definitely need psychological attention. For the ordinary balikbayans and their families, they are faced again with a set of crossroads which would include:

- (1) *Realignment of roles.* Each party, having learned to take on new roles during the separation must examine the role/s that each one must take. Will one continue to be the breadwinner living abroad? Will the other continue playing the dual role of parenting?
- (2) *Reworking of family relationships.* With children having gotten used to turning to only one parent, how does the absentee parent develop greater rapport with and closeness to the children? What about children who got into trouble while the parent was away? The spouse that went astray? The relative who spread rumors? How does one move away from blame and start rebuilding lives? Is the bond strong enough to withstand another separation or being reunited with "new selves"?
- (3) *Reassessment of values.* Having had a taste of the "good life" (at a price), how much longer is the migrant worker willing to pay the price? Are the respective lists of priorities of a couple in consonance with those of others (e.g., family members) whose lives will be affected by the decision to work abroad again or to stay for good?

- (4) *A possible return to the Philippine labor force.* Can the migrant worker find a local job? Is there a willingness to work here? Will the compensation and working conditions be better or worse than what one has been used to?
- (5) *Charting future plans.* How temporary is working abroad? Is staying abroad a permanent option? How will this affect the lives of family members? If permanency is not an option, then how long is temporary?

Just as the workers and their families learned to live apart but somehow together, now they have to live together but somehow apart. But can they?

For migrants who are considering the option of staying in the Philippines, the equation of Homans on profit can be used (Simpson 1976):

$$\text{Profit} = \text{Rewards} - (\text{Punishments} + \text{Costs}), \text{ with}$$

$$\text{Costs} = \text{Rewards Forgone} - \text{Punishments* Avoided}$$

The rewards that can be foregone are the following:

- (1) a relatively comfortable income: the dollars, yen, riyal, etc.
- (2) the relative ease and greater capacity to make big purchases such as electronic goods, "imported" items;
- (3) the comfort of having friends who underwent similar experience as they did;
- (4) the "peace of mind" knowing that the family is financially well-provided for; and
- (5) the lifestyle of independence, with opportunity to travel, "the good life."

On the other hand, punishments which could be avoided may include:

- (1) separation from family
- (2) harsh climate

- (3) employment risks**
- (4) discrimination**
- (5) poor living conditions**

Although, all of the studies (Cruz 1989; ILMS 1984; Samonte 1990) indicate separation from the family as one of the disadvantages of living abroad, there are certain methodological considerations. Listed below are the processual and contextual factors that must be noted:

- (1) Most of these workers were interviewed when they were home and with their families at the same time. This being the case, it could have been much easier to forget the pain and the loneliness as they were safely esconced in the midst of their families. Time had also elapsed between the experience and the interview, blurring the acuteness of homesickness.
- (2) To deal with the loneliness abroad, workers may have learned to anesthetize themselves and not allow themselves to feel this emotion.
- (3) Having been a survivor, one's sense of "self-efficacy" (that one can do it again and survive) increases. In fact, the experience is viewed positively, making a person more adaptable, flexible and insightful (Furnham 1988:47).
- (4) Having found friends who can empathize with them, some of the affective needs are met. (In fact, in certain cases, intimate relationships have been formed).
- (5) Assessing their alternatives vis-a-vis their goals may bring them to conclude that the alternatives in the Philippines may not bring them, certainly not fast enough, to the realization of their goals. The Equity Theory (Brown 1986), which is an expansion of the Exchange Theory, states that people tend to compare their profits with their investments. And a person who invests more would feel he is entitled to larger rewards, if there are any, because he has risked suffering at greater costs. These workers have incurred heavy debts, have put all their energies, body, mind and soul into working abroad. They will try to recoup their investments. Definitely, "monetary advantages provide strong impetus for the overseas workers in the Philippines...income increases are fairly substantial...a threefold increase in income for families left behind" (Paganoni 1984:90-91).

* intrinsically unpleasant experiences

** not necessarily applicable to all

Thus, if these considerations are added to the equation, it is little wonder then that the impact of such a separation diminishes in force (as compared to when it was first felt). The equation then tilts in favor of rewards forgone and the costs to staying in the Philippines become greater. It does not come as a surprise then, that despite all the difficulties, these workers would still want to go back (Sayo 1991). Of those interviewed by the Institute of Labor and Manpower Studies (ILMS 1984:85), 86.5 percent were enthusiastic about leaving again. However, they were not as eager to stay abroad permanently (1984:85). In another study, Filipino professionals and students in the U.S. taking further studies were found to be "so pessimistic about their own future prospects at home that they consider emigrating in order to facilitate the careers of their children as well as of themselves" (Glaser 1978:113). Moreover, it was found that the pull of the family was less powerful and that feelings of patriotism were least mentioned by Filipinos. An exploratory study of a colleague in the department shows that for a sample of U.P. students, the most salient membership they have is the family, and nation comes only after gender and school (Conaco n.d.). Entertainers also believed that they could accomplish more abroad (Conaco n.d.; Robles 1991).

Although policymakers, NGO workers, social scientists and other concerned people would cite social costs such as "broken homes, unfaithful wives, wayward children, etc." (Kurth and Ngo 1984:78) as heavy and pressing, the argument used by those who incur such costs are that the alternatives do not encourage workers to consider staying as a viable option. Second, the attitudes and perceptions of migrant workers and their immediate circles are favorably disposed towards overseas work. And third, there are sufficient facilitating conditions which make overseas work a viable option. In other words, the environmental, individual and social factors are all supportive of the decision to incur the costs.

Recommendations for Research

Given the lack of data in determining the nature and extent of the psychosocial costs of the full cycle of deployment of Filipinos, it is imperative to get answers for the following questions:

- (1) How do migrant workers and vicarious migrants define psychosocial costs? (Indicators)
- (2) What proportion of migrant workers and vicarious migrants incur such costs?
- (3) What are the similarities and differences in psychosocial costs of migrant workers, vicarious migrants and their communities?

- (4) What are the predictors (e.g., demographic variables, country of destination, type of job, etc.) for psychosocial costs?
- (5) What are the short-term and long-term psychosocial costs?

It is strongly suggested that future studies be longitudinal and prospective in nature. Then and only then can we evaluate the issue of psychosocial costs more adequately.

Endnotes

¹ In 1988 and 1990, unemployment rates were registered at 11.2% and 8.2%, consecutively (Amante 1990).

² In 1990, GNP was \$727 (Amante 1990).

³ The deteriorating economic conditions were aggravated by natural and manmade calamities, its foreign debt of \$27 billion, and mass poverty (Amante 1990).

⁴ It is acknowledged that the dollars migrant workers remit to the Philippines play a big role in propping up the economy.

⁵ As cited in Amante, "the promotion of overseas employment is a cornerstone of current labor policy by the Philippine Government. This policy started in the 1980s but only in recognition of the foreign exchange benefits that a long history of migration has provided the Philippine economy...The main overseas labor market since the 1980s has been the Middle East...When the Middle Eastern Countries reached the peak of their absorptive capacity...The European, Japanese and now traditional overseas labor markets became the object of a more systematic strategy" (1990:15).

⁶ The kuha system is "getting your relatives" system.

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