

Rising Above the Waters: Narrative Inquiry Into the Rewriting of Family Legacies by Filipino Adults Triumphant Over Intergenerational Poverty

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The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2026
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

This study examines how Filipino adults have disrupted intergenerational poverty through their lived experiences using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. Ten adults, aged 36–50, were purposively selected from urban and rural communities across the Philippines, representing diverse socioeconomic backgrounds from subsistence households to middle-class families. Participants were selected specifically for having achieved upward mobility despite intergenerational economic hardship. In-depth, semi-structured interviews explored how participants interpreted and navigated poverty across time, relationships, and places, shifting focus from economic metrics to relational and experiential dimensions. Anchored in Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework, findings are organized into four resonant threads, resilience, altruism, faith and formation, and tenacity, revealing recurring patterns across participants' life stories. One participant, for example, described working multiple informal jobs to support siblings' education while simultaneously caring for younger relatives, demonstrating resilience and altruism intertwined with faith and formation. Bowen Family Systems Theory was applied analytically to examine how family emotional processes, differentiation of self, and relational dynamics shaped their capacity for upward mobility. The findings highlight the relational and meaning-making aspects of poverty disruption and underscore the importance of culturally grounded, family-sensitive approaches. This study contributes to literature on poverty, family studies, and mental health by offering contextually rich insights relevant to counseling, education, and community-based interventions in the Philippine context. By centering participants' narratives, the study illustrates how intergenerational legacies can be rewritten through perseverance, relational support, and intentional, informed life choices.

Keywords: intergenerational poverty, narrative inquiry, Filipino adults, family systems theory, resilience, social mobility

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Introduction

Intergenerational poverty remains a persistent global challenge, characterized by the transmission of economic hardship, limited educational opportunities, unstable employment, and restricted social mobility across multiple generations within families. In the Philippines, despite recent improvements in national poverty statistics, millions of Filipinos continue to experience chronic poverty shaped by structural inequalities, limited access to quality education, precarious labor conditions, and socioeconomic instability. The Philippine Statistics Authority reported a decline in poverty incidence from 18.1% in 2021 to 15.5% in 2023, equivalent to approximately 2.45 million fewer Filipinos living below the poverty threshold (National Economic and Development Authority [NEDA], 2024). Nevertheless, many Filipino families remain vulnerable to recurring cycles of deprivation that extend across generations.

Existing literature on poverty has largely focused on identifying its causes and proposing interventions aimed at alleviation. Studies have examined the cultural, societal, familial, and psychological dimensions that sustain intergenerational poverty, including limited educational access, unstable employment, systemic inequality, adverse family dynamics, and weakened social support systems. While these studies contribute significantly to understanding poverty persistence, considerably less attention has been given to individuals who successfully disrupted these intergenerational patterns and achieved upward mobility despite enduring structural and relational disadvantages.

In the Philippine context, narratives of individuals who have “*naka-ahon sa kahirapan*” or risen above poverty are commonly celebrated in public discourse. However, these stories are often anecdotal and remain insufficiently documented within scholarly research. There is limited qualitative literature examining the lived experiences of Filipino adults who have successfully overcome intergenerational poverty and the relational, cultural, and personal processes that contributed to their transformation. This gap limits the development of culturally grounded and family-sensitive interventions that can better support vulnerable Filipino families navigating chronic economic hardship.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived narratives of ten Filipino adults who successfully overcame intergenerational poverty. Using a qualitative narrative inquiry approach grounded in the three-dimensional framework of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), the study examines how participants interpreted and navigated poverty across time, relationships, and place. Particular attention is given to the influence of cultural, societal, familial, and personal factors that shaped their pathways toward upward mobility.

The study is further anchored in Bowen Family Systems Theory, particularly the concept of differentiation of self, which emphasizes how individuals develop emotional autonomy while remaining connected within family systems. Through this lens, the study examines how family emotional processes, relational patterns, and multigenerational dynamics influenced participants' capacity to transcend inherited economic adversity.

By centering the voices and narratives of Filipino adults who successfully disrupted intergenerational poverty, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on poverty, family systems, resilience, and social mobility. More importantly, it offers contextually grounded insights that may inform counseling practice, family-centered interventions, educational initiatives, and policy development aimed at supporting Filipino families experiencing chronic poverty.

Literature Review

Intergenerational Poverty

Intergenerational poverty refers to the persistent transmission of economic hardship, limited opportunities, and social disadvantage across multiple generations within families. Existing literature demonstrates that poverty is not solely an economic condition but also a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by cultural, societal, familial, and psychological factors. Studies have identified limited access to education, unstable employment, systemic inequality, and restricted social mobility as significant contributors to the continuation of poverty across generations (Bavaro et al., 2024; Rutkowski et al., 2016; Visser et al., 2021).

Research further suggests that poverty is reinforced through family dynamics, environmental stressors, and internalized beliefs that influence individuals' perceptions of opportunity and self-worth (Böhnke & Zölch, 2018; Fu et al., 2020; Tribble & Kim, 2019). Structural barriers such as inadequate labor opportunities, geographic disadvantage, and unequal access to resources continue to constrain upward mobility for many families experiencing chronic deprivation (MacDonald et al., 2020; Rutkowski et al., 2016; Wu et al., 2019). In the Philippine context, studies on poverty have predominantly focused on economic interventions and welfare programs, with limited attention given to the lived experiences of individuals who successfully disrupted intergenerational poverty patterns (Lluz, 2020).

Pathways Out of Poverty

Although poverty often persists across generations, literature also highlights several pathways that enable individuals and families to achieve upward mobility. Education consistently emerges as one of the most significant transformative factors in disrupting poverty cycles. Research demonstrates that educational attainment improves employment opportunities, enhances earning potential, and strengthens long-term social mobility (Jackson, 2024; Pohan & Vitale, 2016; Vân, 2018). Beyond formal education, studies also emphasize the importance of mentorship, entrepreneurship, livelihood opportunities, and supportive social welfare programs in helping vulnerable populations overcome chronic poverty (Cudia, 2019; Hemingway, 2023; Hirai & Hiyane, 2021; Morris et al., 2020).

In addition to structural support, resilience and personal agency play vital roles in poverty disruption. Individuals who successfully transcend poverty often demonstrate perseverance, adaptability, long-term goal orientation, and the capacity to navigate adversity despite significant limitations. Community support, faith, family encouragement, and access to meaningful relationships further strengthen individuals' capacity to pursue opportunities for upward mobility (Jacinto, 2023; Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2015).

Family Systems and Relational Dynamics

Family Systems Theory provides an important framework for understanding how relational processes shape human development and behavior. Bowen Family Systems Theory conceptualizes the family as an emotional and interconnected system in which the experiences and behaviors of one member influence the functioning of the entire family unit (Bowen, 1978). One of the central concepts within the theory is differentiation of self, which refers to an individual's ability to maintain emotional autonomy while remaining meaningfully connected to the family system (Calatrava et al., 2021).

Research grounded in family systems perspectives suggests that multigenerational emotional patterns, family expectations, parenting dynamics, and relational stress significantly influence how individuals respond to adversity and life challenges (Böhnke & Zölch, 2018; Palombi, 2016). Families experiencing chronic poverty often encounter heightened emotional stress, instability, and role strain, which may reinforce cycles of disadvantage across generations (Tribble & Kim, 2019). At the same time, supportive family relationships and adaptive emotional functioning can foster resilience and facilitate upward mobility (Stack et al., 2015; Upadhyaya et al., 2021).

Resilience and Social Mobility

Resilience is frequently identified in literature as a critical factor in overcoming adversity and achieving social mobility. Rather than viewing resilience as a fixed individual trait, contemporary studies describe it as a dynamic process shaped by personal determination, relational support, environmental opportunities, and cultural context (Jacinto, 2023; Marsh-McDonald & Schroeder, 2015). Individuals who overcome poverty often draw strength from supportive relationships, meaningful life goals, spirituality, and opportunities for growth despite enduring structural hardship (Fu et al., 2020; Hemingway, 2023).

Within the Philippine context, resilience is deeply intertwined with collectivist cultural values such as family solidarity, relational responsibility, and communal support. Filipino families frequently rely on shared sacrifice, emotional interconnectedness, and faith-based coping during periods of hardship. These cultural dynamics influence how individuals interpret adversity and construct pathways toward upward mobility (Cabaguing & Villanueva, 2022; Jacinto, 2023). Understanding these lived experiences is essential in developing culturally grounded interventions that move beyond purely economic understandings of poverty and recognize the relational and meaning-making dimensions of social mobility.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the lived experiences of Filipino adults who successfully overcame intergenerational poverty. Narrative inquiry focuses on understanding how individuals construct meaning from their experiences across time, relationships, and social contexts. Anchored in the three-dimensional narrative inquiry framework of Connelly and Clandinin (1990), the study examined participants' experiences through the dimensions of temporality, sociality, and place.

A purposive sampling strategy was utilized to select ten Filipino adults aged 36 to 50 who had experienced intergenerational poverty and subsequently achieved upward mobility. Participants came from diverse urban and rural communities in the Philippines and represented various professional and socioeconomic backgrounds. Selection criteria included having parents and grandparents who lived below the poverty line and demonstrating sustained socioeconomic improvement through education, employment, entrepreneurship, or professional achievement.

Data were gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews designed to encourage participants to narrate their personal experiences of poverty, struggle, resilience, and transformation. Open-ended questions allowed participants to reflect on the cultural, societal, familial, and personal factors that shaped their journeys.

Data analysis followed a thematic narrative approach guided by repeated reading, coding, and cross-participant synthesis. Emerging patterns across participants' narratives were organized into resonant thematic threads that reflected shared experiences and meaning-making processes. Bowen Family Systems Theory, particularly the concept of differentiation of self, served as an interpretive lens in examining how family emotional processes and relational dynamics influenced participants' pathways out of poverty.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants provided informed consent prior to data collection, and pseudonyms were used to protect confidentiality and anonymity. The researcher also practiced reflexivity to ensure sensitivity and ethical responsibility in interpreting participants' lived experiences.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of participants' narratives revealed recurring patterns of meaning-making, adaptation, and transformation across their lived experiences of intergenerational poverty. Despite differences in background, geography, and profession, participants shared common relational and emotional processes that shaped their journeys toward upward mobility. These patterns were synthesized into four resonant threads collectively conceptualized as the RAFT of *Pag-Ahon* (*rising above poverty and diversity*) Framework: resilience, altruism, faith and formation, and tenacity.

Resilience: Enduring Scarcity Across Time

Participants consistently described experiences of prolonged deprivation, instability, and hardship during childhood and early adulthood. Many recounted growing up in overcrowded homes, experiencing food insecurity, engaging in informal labor at an early age, and witnessing financial conflict within the family. Despite these adversities, participants demonstrated the capacity to persist, adapt, and maintain future-oriented goals.

One participant recalled balancing multiple informal jobs while continuing education and supporting younger siblings. Others described using hardship as motivation to pursue professional achievement and economic stability. These narratives suggest that resilience was not merely an individual trait but a process shaped by relational support, meaning-making, and sustained perseverance over time.

From a Bowen Family Systems perspective, resilience may be understood as connected to differentiation of self. Participants demonstrated increasing emotional regulation and capacity for independent decision-making despite chronic family anxiety and socioeconomic stress. Rather than becoming emotionally fused with family hopelessness or dysfunction, many participants gradually developed greater clarity of self and intentionality in shaping their futures.

Altruism: Responsibility and Relational Commitment

A significant theme across narratives was the early assumption of responsibility toward family members. Participants frequently described sacrificing personal comfort, delaying individual goals, or assuming caregiving and financial provider roles to support siblings, parents, or extended relatives.

Several participants emphasized that their motivation to succeed was rooted not solely in personal ambition but in the desire to improve their family's condition. Financial achievement was often interpreted as a collective rather than purely individual accomplishment. These findings reflect the collectivist orientation of Filipino culture, where family obligation and relational interconnectedness strongly shape decision-making and life goals.

Bowen Family Systems Theory helps illuminate how participants navigated relational responsibilities while simultaneously pursuing individual growth. Although some participants experienced emotional burden and pressure within family systems, many developed healthier boundaries and differentiated functioning over time. Their narratives suggest that upward mobility involved not only financial advancement but also the capacity to maintain emotional connection without becoming overwhelmed by familial expectations.

Faith and Formation: Transformative Relationships Beyond the Family

Participants also identified the significant influence of mentors, educators, faith communities, employers, and supportive social networks in their journeys out of poverty. Many described encounters with individuals who affirmed their potential, provided guidance, or created opportunities that altered the trajectory of their lives.

Faith emerged as a particularly powerful source of meaning, hope, and emotional endurance. Participants frequently framed their struggles through spiritual language and interpreted their experiences as part of a larger purpose. Religious belief often functioned as both emotional support and a framework for sustaining perseverance during periods of uncertainty.

These findings reinforce existing literature suggesting that overcoming poverty is not achieved solely through economic intervention but also through the presence of supportive relational systems and psychologically sustaining beliefs. The narratives further demonstrate that transformative relationships beyond the immediate family can interrupt multigenerational cycles of hopelessness and limitation.

Tenacity: Intentional and Sustained Pursuit of Mobility

The final resonant thread centered on tenacity, reflected in participants' long-term commitment to personal advancement despite repeated setbacks and structural barriers. Participants described continuing education despite financial hardship, rebuilding after failures, enduring workplace discrimination, and persistently seeking opportunities for growth. Importantly, upward mobility was rarely described as immediate or linear. Participants emphasized that transformation occurred gradually over many years and often required emotional maturity, disciplined decision-making, and sustained self-development. Several narratives illustrated that success was not solely measured through financial stability but also through increased self-confidence, emotional independence, and the ability to create healthier family environments for future generations.

Viewed through Bowen's framework, these experiences reflect progressive differentiation of self across the lifespan. Participants increasingly demonstrated the ability to act according to personal principles and long-term goals rather than reacting solely to emotional pressures or environmental instability. Their narratives suggest that disrupting intergenerational poverty involves both economic mobility and emotional transformation within family systems.

Integrative Discussion and Implications

Collectively, the findings reveal that overcoming intergenerational poverty is a deeply relational and multidimensional process. Economic mobility alone does not fully explain participants' experiences. Instead, their narratives highlight the interplay among resilience, relational responsibility, supportive social connections, spirituality, and intentional selfdevelopment.

The findings also challenge deficit-based views of poverty that focus exclusively on pathology or dependency. Participants' stories illustrate the presence of agency, adaptive coping, and meaning-making even within contexts of severe disadvantage. At the same time, the narratives acknowledge that personal perseverance alone is insufficient without opportunities, supportive relationships, and broader social support systems.

The study contributes to family studies, counseling, and social development literature by emphasizing the importance of culturally grounded and family-sensitive approaches to poverty intervention. For mental health practitioners, the findings underscore the value of addressing chronic family anxiety, relational patterns, and emotional differentiation when working with individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. For educators and policymakers, the study highlights the importance of mentorship, accessible education, community support systems, and long-term developmental interventions that move beyond short-term financial assistance.

Ultimately, the narratives demonstrate that intergenerational poverty can be disrupted through the convergence of relational support, emotional growth, cultural values, and sustained intentional action across time.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of Filipino adults who successfully overcame intergenerational poverty through a qualitative narrative inquiry approach. The findings revealed that disrupting intergenerational poverty is not solely an economic achievement but a deeply relational, emotional, and developmental process shaped by resilience, altruism, faith and formation, and tenacity. Through the RAFT of *Pag-Ahon (rising above poverty and adversity)* Framework, the study illuminated how participants navigated chronic adversity, sustained family responsibilities, cultivated supportive relationships, and pursued long-term upward mobility despite enduring structural limitations.

The narratives further demonstrated that overcoming poverty involves progressive emotional growth and increasing differentiation of self within family systems. Guided by Bowen Family Systems Theory, the study highlighted how participants gradually developed emotional autonomy, intentional decision-making, and healthier relational patterns while remaining connected to their families and communities. These findings reinforce the importance of culturally grounded and family-sensitive approaches in understanding poverty disruption within the Philippine context.

The study contributes to literature on intergenerational poverty, family systems, resilience, and social mobility by centering the voices of Filipino adults whose experiences remain underrepresented in academic research. The findings may inform counseling practice, educational initiatives, community-based interventions, and policy development that recognize

the relational and meaning-making dimensions of poverty beyond purely economic indicators. Ultimately, the stories shared by participants demonstrate that while poverty may persist across generations, family legacies can be rewritten through perseverance, supportive relationships, emotional transformation, and intentional life choices.

Acknowledgements

The author expresses sincere gratitude to the Filipino participants who generously shared their lived experiences and personal narratives, making this study possible. Deep appreciation is also extended to the dissertation panel and mentors from the Department of Family Studies of Miriam College for their guidance, encouragement, and scholarly insights throughout the research process. The author likewise acknowledges the unwavering support of family, friends, and colleagues whose encouragement sustained the completion of this study. Special thanks are extended to individuals and communities who contributed through mentorship, reflection, and meaningful conversations that enriched the development of this research. Above all, the author offers gratitude to God for the strength, wisdom, and perseverance granted throughout this academic journey.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that generative AI and AI-assisted technologies were used such as Grammarly in the organization, language refinement, and proofreading of portions of the manuscript. The use of these technologies was limited to improving clarity, coherence, grammar, and structural presentation. All core ideas, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions are original to the author and were derived from the careful and systematic conduct of the research. The author assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the manuscript.

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