

***Stories of Diaspora of Overseas Filipino Workers in Singapore:
A Management Perspective***

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Abstract

This qualitative study focused on the documentation and analysis of the narratives on the diaspora stories of the overseas Filipino workers in Singapore in the contexts of their fear, opportunities, and management initiatives, viewed through management perspectives. The Filipino diaspora has gone global having overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) present in all parts of the world. Push factors motivated many Filipinos to seek better job opportunities in developed countries such as Singapore since it offers higher salaries. However, the length of stay for work in the said country is limited by the working pass. Using narrative inquiry as a research design, data were collected through face-to-face interview with the OFW storytellers working in Singapore for five years and more under working pass. Results were then inferred with the functions of management to surface the management perspectives. The narratives revealed that the storytellers were motivated by better quality of life and higher salary. They fear the unknown and uncertainties on their return home. For the opportunities, storytellers consider putting businesses. For management initiatives, they revealed that companies provide skills development programs that could help them. The narratives surfaced plausible inferences on the planning, leading, organizing, and controlling functions of management. The findings and discussions highlighted the importance of education as means to equip the OFWs with the necessary skills and knowledge as they prepare for their return home. It reflected the value of education being integral to their personal and professional growth. They appreciate the initiative of their employers of providing opportunities for learning as they aspire to improve their live

Keywords: management functions, management perspectives, narrative inquiry, overseas Filipino workers, return-home stories

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Introduction

The Filipinos are conquering the world by being present in almost all of the countries living and working as migrants. The current social, political, and economic status of the country has pushed the talented and skilled human resource asset for local businesses out of the country as they were pulled by better opportunities, higher wages, and ideal social and political landscapes offered by the global businesses in the developed countries (Massey et al., 1994; Kalaw, 2015).

Globalization enabled Singapore to expand and accept global businesses that provided jobs for its citizens and opened doors of opportunities for migrant workers. Multitude of multinational companies started to exist, which made Singapore's economy grow and continuously thrive. It has now become one of the richest countries in the world, which opened a lot of opportunities not only for skilled labor but most importantly for the professionals. Because of this, many Filipinos left the country and sought refuge in the many opportunities that Singapore has to offer. PSA (2017) reported that the estimated number of Filipinos working in Singapore tripled in the past decade which comprises 5.6% of the 85% of OFWs in Asia. This number has certainly grown bigger to this day and continues to grow as more Filipinos opt to work in companies in Singapore.

Living and working in Singapore may seem to be the newer and easier way to achieve the Filipino dream. However, these Filipino migrant workers in Singapore will also have to face the inevitable reality that their working permits will eventually expire. Many of them missed to consider this as they are overwhelmed by their new lives as migrant workers in the said country. They are too busy to notice that their stay in Singapore will eventually come to an end and that they will have to come back home to the Philippines.

Research Question and Objectives

The main objective of documenting and analyzing the narratives on the diaspora stories of the OFWs working in Singapore on their eventual return home have culled out emergent subjects and themes that were inferred to management perspective. The overarching question assisted in facilitating the development of knowledge:

What diaspora stories do Singapore OFWs tell in the contexts of their:

1. Motivation;
2. Fears;
3. Opportunities; and
4. Management Initiatives?

The narratives were inferred to the discipline of management particularly in the different functions of management. Their contexts exposed meanings that helped in understanding its relevance to the field of management.

Significance of the Study

The study identified concepts and themes related to the narratives coming from the personal viewpoint and experiences of the storytellers. The findings have shown specific significance on the following:

Theory – as a source of information in developing leadership and management theories particularly for multinational organizations.

Policy – as reference for policy development, particularly for government agencies.

Practice – as reference for multinational companies in improving management initiatives, systems, and processes in consideration of the existence of the migrants.

Social Action – as contribution to the betterment of the lives of the OFWs returning home after the end of their contract.

This study also values the importance of the contribution of the OFWs to social development considering their remittances that boosts the country's perilous economy.

Philosophical Lens

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) consider the philosophical assumptions as key premises that are folded into interpretive frameworks used in qualitative research. Thus, this study was grounded on the philosophical lens of interpretivism and other theories of management.

Interpretivism as described as social constructivism seeks understanding of the world in which participants live and work. They develop subjective meanings of their experiences.

Theory of Ladder of Inference - Tompkins and Rhodes (2012) describe the theory as an opinion-forming theory as it helps explain social phenomena adding credibility and influence in moving between data and inference concepts to perceived meanings.

Contingency Theory - it is also believed that contingency managers pay attention to both the situation and their own styles and make efforts to ensure both interact efficiently (Rana et al., 2016). This premise provided a better understanding on the experiences in their work environment in terms of the response and actions of the managers in consideration of the situation of the OFWs.

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study revolved around the documentation and analysis of the narratives in the stories of the Overseas Filipino Workers working in multinational companies in Singapore under contract or working pass. It covered the fears and anxieties they experienced as they deal with the hanging reality of returning home as well as the opportunities that they see and prepare for. It also considered their worldview and perspectives on management initiatives that could be related to their eventual return-home.

The study was limited on the perspective of the storytellers and did not cover the side of the management of multinational companies. They may be referred to later on as an expansion on this novel study.

Literature Review

In the Philippines, migration has been a culture deemed common, acceptable and desirable for a better life. For over decades, a large number of Filipinos have left their place of origin in search of either a temporary or permanent settlement overseas because of attractive economic and political circumstances in their chosen destination. More than 10 million or 10 percent of the population are working and living abroad (Asis, 2017). Filipinos are scattered all around the globe because of work. Destinations of Filipino Migrants are diversified (POEA, 2015). Collosan (2011) further stated that OFWs travel to their country of destination in search for better opportunities and better life for their families in the Philippines. Low earning capacity and unemployment contribute to the widening income gap between the rich and the poor (Collosan, 2011). The Philippines is recorded to have one of the worst income disparities in the Region where the rich becomes richer and the poor becomes poorer. This contributes mainly as motivation for the people to migrate and work abroad.

Dependent on their income or salary in the host country, a migrant workers' contribution to their families in their country of origin is important. For migrants coming from low-income countries, remittances are the only way to make their ends meet. Remittances play a significant role in the Philippines and are the primary means through which the country attempts to overcome its historic trade deficits and manage its balance of payments (Wiley, 2012). OFWs prefer to go to developed countries because of higher wages that enable them to send bigger remittances. Singapore is one of the most open economies in the Asian region when it come international trade, foreign direct investment inflows and foreign labor inflows. According to Yue (2011), the high foreign labor ration shows the buoyant labor demand, limited domestic labor supply with the decreasing total fertility rate and labor protectionism in Singapore. Foreign labor is needed to grow the population, mitigate the ageing population, grow the GDP and the per capita one, cover the shortages in supply in labor and skills and contain wage costs to continue the international competitiveness. The competition in the workplace aggravated the situation because Filipino migrant workers are being employed as professionals, managers, executives and technicians already (Kalaw, 2015).

It has been argued by Chung and Tung (2011) that the knowledge and the linkages these migrants obtain allows them to reduce transaction costs for bilateral trade. It is a result of a so-called ethnic network effect coming from superior cultural understanding and levels of trust. Fragomen, Jr. (2016) stated that the overarching goal of the Business Mechanism is a regulatory environment in which labor migration policies support business and development to create job opportunities and economic prosperity. Looking at the business-level perspective, organizations exist in a very complex environment wherein it is directly affected by globalization (Go, 2012). For it to thrive and succeed, it must learn to adjust and adapt to the ever-changing conditions of the global market which includes leading and managing migrant workers.

Methodology

This study was *qualitative* in nature as the research problem inquired into the meaning that individuals or groups ascribe to as a social or human problem (Creswell, 2007). Also, qualitative research fully captured the context and the feelings within which storytellers express their fears and anxieties that contributes to their diaspora stories and how it is inferred in the functions of management. *Narrative inquiry*, which is both a methodology and view of the phenomena, was utilized to document and analyze the narratives. Narrative inquiry is a way to study experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The defining features of narrative research is very much applicable as a research design for this study. According to Creswell (2013), narrative researches collect stories from individuals about individuals lived and told experiences. The heart of this study lies on the stories that came from the storytellers themselves.

The research locale of this study was Singapore as it is a popular destination for OFWs. It also has a unique system of providing working pass for specific period where the main problem of the study stemmed out.

The OFW storytellers were (1) single; (2) aged 30-40years old; (3) had been working in Singapore for five years or more; and (4) have experienced being denied of a working pass. Using snow ball technique, I was able to gather from seven (7) storytellers, who fit the qualifications set, rich data coming from their personal viewpoints and experiences.

One of the most important qualitative data collection methods used in conducting field studies and ethnographic researches is the research interview (Qu & Dumay, 2011). An interview guide was also utilized that lists the questions or issues that were explored in the course of the interview.

To systematically and strategically process and analyze the collected data, I followed Creswell's Data Analysis Spiral in which the process of data collection, analysis, and report writing are interrelated and go on simultaneously. The transcript of the interviews was plotted in the MAXQDA 2018 software for processing. From which, important statements coming from the narratives were highlighted and assigned with a specific code. Also, thematic analysis was treated as a primary descriptive strategy to establish patterns of experiences within the data that were coded. The patterns and the emergent, iterative concepts helped in identifying the themes that are responsive to the research question.

Results and Discussion

This study has gone beyond the social and economic rationale of migration and working abroad as it puts more interest in the diaspora stories of the OFWs in Singapore as viewed and inferred using management lens. The narratives of the storytellers revealed significant findings as they shared their diaspora stories in the contexts of motivation, fears, opportunities, and management initiatives.

Table 1: Summary of Findings (Categories and Emergent Themes)

What are the diaspora stories of the Overseas Filipino Workers in Singapore in terms of:		
Factors	Categories	Emergent Themes
Motivation	Family	Better quality of life and salary
	Better quality of wants	
	Desire for change	
Fears	Adaptability	Fear of the unknown or uncertainties
	Employability	
	Reintegration	
Opportunities	Chance to reunite with family	Use of savings for other plans
	Business opportunities	
	Migration to another country	
Management Initiatives	Education and self-development	Skills development and training
	<i>Financial security and literacy</i>	

Motivation to be an OFW in Singapore. More than 10 % of the population of the country are working and living abroad (Asis, 2017) and this is due to absence of sustained economic development and wavering political stability. Also, issues like unemployment, underemployment and differing wages (Collosan, 2011) motivated many Filipinos to work in developed countries like Singapore. The narratives of our storytellers revealed their motivation being (1) family-inspired by relatives who are also abroad; (2) better quality of wants-having the capacity to afford high-end wants, and the (3) change in environment-having experienced better social services and facilities. In return, the OFWs make sure that they excel in their fields. According to Portugal (2015), OFWs are a major force in Singapore's service sector.

Fears. Considering the comfortable life that our storytellers have experienced in Singapore, they also narrated their fears and concerns in realizing that they will eventually need to go back home. Return home completes the transnational migration process and is an essential part of temporary labor migration (Kalaw, 2015). It reflects in full circle the diaspora stories of the OFWs as they go through a change in their perceptions and relationships in coping with daily struggles while anticipating a guaranteed return to their families and homeland. The narratives of the storytellers exposed that they fear (1) adaptability-as they may not be able to assimilate quickly back as they got so used to a comfortable and convenient life compared to that of in the Philippines; (2) Employability-there is uncertainty that they may not be able to find a suitable employment that would support their new lifestyle and would maximize their enhanced skills; (3) Reintegration-the fear of going back to the old life of discomforts and inconveniences in the country.

Opportunities. The storytellers already resolved with the truth that they will not be able to find job opportunities similar to what they have in Singapore when they go back home. However, they are consoled by the fact that they would have the chance to make up for the lost times with their loved ones. They view their return as an opportunity and (1) Chance to reunite with their family-as they have been away for

quite a time and this will enable them to make up for the lost times and take care of their aging parents and be with their loved ones; (2) Business Opportunities-putting up their own business using the money that they were able to save while working in Singapore; (3) Migration to another country-many of the storytellers would prefer to migrate and work in another country when their working pass expires instead of settling back in the Philippines.

Management Initiatives. According to Chung & Tung (2011), the social connections of migrant workers help to better match international buyers and sellers. In effect, migrant employees bring valuable knowledge of overseas markets, particularly those of their country of origin, facilitating foreign market entry by the employing company. Given this, our storytellers narrated that the multi-national companies where they work provide (1) Educational and Self-development Benefits-in consideration of their growth as an employee as well as to ensure productivity in the workplace; (2) Financial Security and Literacy-our storytellers value the importance of saving money as a preparation for the future and finds financial literacy sponsored by the company very helpful as it provides options on how to make their money work for them.

Management Perspective. In the process of documenting and analyzing the context and meaning set forth by the storytellers as they shared their narratives have led the researchers in determining aspects of management that is directly related and borne out of the themes that emerged. Dubrin (2016) defined management as the process of using organizational resources to achieve organizational objectives through planning, organizing and staffing, leading and controlling. The emergent themes have led to determine the specific functions of management that are related to the storytellers' viewpoints and experiences.

Table 2. Emergent Themes inferred to the Functions of Management

	Emergent Themes	Functions of Management
Management Perspectives	Preparation for the future	Planning
	Work Ethics and Management Styles	Leading
	Discrimination and Stereotyping	Organizing and Staffing
	Adherence to Singaporean Government Policies	Controlling

Preparation for the Future. The companies plan for the future of their business, but they seem to disregard and does not include concrete plans for the migrant employees. Because of this, our storytellers are bound to consider having future plans for themselves. Their narratives have exposed a great deal of consideration with what is in store for them in the future and that is why our storytellers are consciously building up their financial portfolio through insurance and investments as well as having regular savings. These narratives have shown a great deal of inference with the *planning* function of management. Planning involves setting goals and figuring out ways of reaching them. Planning is considered to be the central function of management as it pervades everything a manager does. In planning, the manager looks to the future in the same way that our storytellers are also preparing for what lies ahead for them.

Work Ethics and Management Styles. Considering the narratives of our storytellers and taking from the management experts' definition of leading, it is imperative to assume that there is a disconnect with the logical definition and the actual experience of our storytellers. They shared how they like the leadership style of their managers as it encourages disciplined work ethics. However, what is lacking is the sense of direction that could inspire them to perform beyond what is expected. **Leading** an organization means influencing others to achieve organizational objectives. It was easily inferred with considering their narratives on the work ethics and management styles of the Singaporeans and their colleagues. Our storytellers saw how dedicated their managers are to their jobs. They also appreciated the work attitude of the locals who are so keen on details and are quick to respond with work problems and keeps a professional stance on work related concerns.

Discrimination and Stereotyping. The companies need to constantly hire new people to complete the workforce because of the high attrition rate. It also entails cost on the hiring process and the training of the new members of the organization. These affects the **organizing and staffing** function of management. Because of the diversity in the workplace, many of the OFWs working as professionals, who are being related to working in service industries more so as domestic helpers. This kind of stereotyping has led some of our storytellers to feel discriminated. The discrimination does not only stem out of their race but also with the reality that they are working pass holders. Despite their efforts, they cannot deny the fact that they are considered as third-class citizens within the dynamics of their respective companies.

Adherence to Singaporean Government. Our storytellers are well aware of the fact that their length of stay as a foreign worker in Singapore depends on the government. Regardless whether your company would still need your services, but the government says otherwise, then the company will have to submit to the decision of the government. The **controlling** function of management is being observed by the government as they desire to provide opportunities and better social services for their citizens. This is the sad reality that the OFWs need to accept and understand.

Summary of Findings

The storytellers revealed that **having better quality of life** is their main motivation to continue working in Singapore. Summarizing the context of their narratives reveal that there is **fear of the unknown**. They are uncertain of what will happen when they return home. **Business opportunities** seem to be the most ideal and common since they all have savings that they intend to use. Our storytellers were given **opportunities for skills development** which include financial literacy as well as funding for educational advancements to enhance their expertise in their field.

Conclusions

Coming from the narratives of the storytellers, it was concluded that they are **adamant to return home** and their fears of uncertainty prevent them from returning. They would rather find work in other countries than to go back home. This is because of the **big disparity with the salary** as they get to earn more while performing the same task when they were in the Philippines. However, their expiring working pass is still there

so they need to prepare and establish *coping mechanisms*. Their only consolation in returning home is to see their loved ones which reflects their *value for family*. Looking ahead, their *financial literacy* is assumed to help them in being successful with their planned businesses.

The shared viewpoints and experiences of our storytellers confirmed the perspective that *management is a social practice*. Managers learn through both experience and study. The major purpose of management is to help get things done in organizations and losing important, reliable, and diligent OFW employees will affect the achievement of this goal.

Recommendations

Considering the literature, qualitative findings, and conclusions of this study, I present valuable recommendations to the different stakeholders involved:

Multi-national Companies. The experiences of the OFWs may serve as relevant basis for *international management*. The concerns may be addressed by establishing *stronger labor welfare mechanism* that will enable continuous skills development, financial wellness, and opportunities for long term employment. Another recommendation is the *distance employment* or the offshoring of workload and services.

Philippine Government. It is recommended for the Philippine government to be more open to *foreign direct investments* to create more opportunities. Filipinos are positioned to benefit from job opportunities offered by the ASEAN Integration. Another productive move is to establish laws for *unified competition or anti-trust law*. This will address issues of monopoly, abuse of power, and consolidation and allow entry of more global businesses. Lastly, is the review and enforcement of the law for the *protection of the OFWs*. It is good that there are programs, but it will be best of it is enforced to promote the welfare of the OFWs including but not limited to social services, financial security, and employment.

Overseas Filipino Workers. It is recommended that they *develop a strong coping mechanism* that will enable them to handle the stresses brought about by their return home. Another recommendation is to *build financial capability and assets*. They will have to take advantage of the opportunity that they are earning more by saving or putting their money to different investments.

Future Researchers. Future researchers may consider the *stories of the managers* of the OFWs as regards to the reality that their employees will have to return home. Another extension are the stories of OFWs who have returned home and settled. This will provide information that could validate or refute the narratives of our storytellers as regards their perceived fears and opportunities. This study may also serve as a reference for those who will use narrative inquiry as a research design and method.

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