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On-Campus Living Experiences among Filipino University Students

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The study employed documentary analysis approach to describe on-campus living experiences of Filipino university students. Data sets were extracted from mixed methods study on happiness among Filipino university students. Findings indicate the following: 1) positive emotions about on-campus living, 2) negative emotions about on-campus living, 3) feelings about off-campus living arrangements among dormitory residents, and 4) factors contributing to happiness among on-campus student residents.

Keywords: Residential life, student development, well-being, student engagement

Studying in university marks an important milestone for adolescents. It often entails making a number of important life decisions, including whether one will live independently away from one's family. On-campus residence form part of the university life of students, but quality of residential life on-campus has not received significant attention in the literature, particularly in developing countries. Predictors of quality of life among university students residing on-campus include intrapersonal, interpersonal, and contextual factors. Self-esteem, relationship with significant others, socioeconomic status, and housing condition predict student life satisfaction (Chow, 2005). Housing condition, as a contextual factor,

can be divided into *living environment*, such as the physical condition of the residence, and *living arrangements*, such as the people being lived with (Chow, 2005).

The quality of campus-based student residences impacts student learning and well-being. Factors include calm and serene residence environment, well-maintained and clean facilities, fairness in application of disciplinary processes, and efficient resolution of conflicts (Botha, Snowball, de Klerk, & Radloff, 2015). For Muslim, Karim, and Abdullah (2012), specific aspects of the living environment affecting student life satisfaction are:

(1) Student living condition (i.e., accommodation type, location, architectural aspects, internal features and facilities, usability and arrangement of space, size and physical condition of dwelling, dwelling densities, storage and furniture, and maintenance); (2) Student social activities (i.e., roommate social interaction, neighborhood interaction, students' leisure activities, acceptance of students by local residents, students' participation in neighborhood activities); (3) Community facilities and services (i.e., accessibility to campus, city center, health services, shopping and municipal services; availability and maintenance of social, recreational and educational services; and availability of public or neighborhood facilities); (4) Neighborhood physical surroundings (i.e., personalization and identity, privacy, security, and safety); (5) Cost of living (i.e., financial status and behavior, and living expenses); and (6) Student preferences (i.e., source of information and advice in choosing accommodation, time taken to search for accommodation, length of lease, understanding about preference for private house, building social network and developing friendship, freedom to choose where to live, preferred accommodation features, getting connected and staying safe. (pp. 608-609)

In the Philippines, a majority of the universities caters to commuting students, and very few offer on-campus residential facilities. Most Philippine universities and colleges congregate in

urban centers, due to accessibility to transportation, facilities, and services necessary for higher education. The concentration of higher education in the urban center often contributes to the influx of new residents as well as the economic development of the area. It brings about both progress and social problems. Universities often attract local economy by providing opportunities for businesses related to student needs, such as housing, printing, dining, shops, health facilities, leisure and entertainment, among others. Demands for student housing is continuously increasing with the worsening condition of the traffic and public transportation. Living arrangements for Filipino students vary a lot – from staying with parents to living in a boarding house.

If students reside within the vicinity of the university, they often commute to school. Those coming from farther provinces typically look for living options nearby. The most common option is really living with one's family or relatives who live near the university. Others rent apartments, live in boarding houses, or just pay for a bedspace, depending on one's financial capacity. Proximity and affordability are the two most important factors in considering a dormitory or boarding house among Filipino university students (Brilliantes et al., 2012).

Since most dormitories and boarding houses in the Philippines are privately owned, the quality of the facilities and living conditions are unpredictable and largely unregulated. The common practice among university is to accredit private dormitories and boarding houses to address the emerging concern about quality of student housing near universities. But the accreditation is limited in scope and serves the interests and needs of specific universities only, and more importantly, they are not sanctioned by any government agencies regulating housing or higher education.

University Life and Student Well-Being

University life experiences contribute to the full development of students, as higher education prepares them for the transition from school to work. Student affairs professionals and university administrators increasingly provide meaningful and engaging student life experiences through extra-curricular programs that complement the academic life of students. The understanding of student development has become more multidimensional. Factors contributing to student development have expanded. Peer relationships, social interactions, engaging in community outreach programs, faculty-student interactions, extracurricular activities, and quality of classroom learning facilitate student change and development (Capeding, 2002). However, there is still a need to further explore these factors across the different contexts in local higher education institutions, and to test models that connect the factors with well-being.

Local well-being studies provide description of qualities of happy Filipino youth, and as well as factors that contribute to student well-being. Traits of happy and mentally well Filipino youth include being: socially-oriented, independent, satisfied, intellectually capable, conscientious, religious, spiritual, optimistic, principled, good-looking, and self-effacing (Salanga, Villanueva, & Reyes, as cited in Ramos, 2005). On the other hand, happy Filipino adolescents report the following characteristics: (1) having good family life and strong family attachment; (2) receiving recognition and support from family and friends; (3) achieving satisfying interpersonal relationship with significant others; (4) having harmonious interpersonal relationships; (5) valuing friends and group belongingness; and (6) being able to express one's happiness with others (Ramos, 2005). In relation to factors influencing well-being, the following are the important findings among Filipino university students: (1) self-esteem and social support predicts life satisfaction and positive affect among Filipino university students (Reyes, 2004, 2005); and (2) academic

performance, social relations, organizational affiliation, living arrangements, and family situations positively correlates with subjective well-being (Ramos & Urbi, 2004).

Although there are a number of local studies on happiness among Filipino adolescents and university students, there are few studies focusing on exploring the experiences of university students residing on-campus. In an attempt to address the research gap, the study describes how Filipino college students experience living in dormitories in an urban-based state university. It specifically looks into the following: 1) how they feel about living on-campus residence halls, 2) how they feel about off-campus living arrangements, and 3) what factors contribute to their happiness as on-campus University residents.

Method

The study analyzed interview transcripts extracted from all 15 participants who lived in the residence halls of the university. Data were content-analyzed using conventional data analysis strategies used in interview-based research. Interview transcripts were analyzed to generate the categories. Transcript statements were grouped based on categories and compared to further define key ideas from the responses. Exemplar statements were selected to illustrate instances of the abstracted findings.

Results and Discussion

Life in University Residence Halls

The participants lived in the residence halls of a large university located in a metropolitan area. The university operates 10 dormitories catering to both undergraduate and graduate students. Each dormitory is headed by a dormitory manager, assisted by house parents, and resident assistants. Admission to the dormitories is

quite competitive given the limited slots. Students typically file an application. Criteria for selection include: student should belong to lower income level, priority is given to those belonging to lower income groups; geographic origin – students coming from farther places are prioritized, those living within the metropolitan area are not prioritized but often given slots due to the prerogative of dormitory managers.

Upon receipt of notice of acceptance, students are assigned to specific dwelling units or rooms. Room assignments are done by gender. Rooms are occupied either by male or female students. Although there are coed dormitories, they have designated wings for each gender. Some dormitories are specifically and exclusively assigned for each gender group. Each dwelling unit has the following furniture for each student: bed with used cushion, study table and chair, and locker for storage. Toilet, study, dining, and recreational facilities are communal. Students can bring in their personal equipment (e.g., computers, electric fans, electronic gadgets) but they pay for additional charge for use of electricity. The ratio of toilet facilities and student users are insufficient. Often students have to line up to use the facilities.

Residential life is highly regulated and monitored. There are specific rules governing expected student behaviors and decorum inside the dormitories, which includes: restrictions for cooking and laundry inside the dorms, observing curfew, welcoming visitors, registry of personal appliances, restrictions against use of alcohol and drugs within the premises, conflict resolution, student activities.

Living in the university dormitories provides great convenience to the students. All the dormitories are strategically located near facilities offering basic services for university students related to dining, printing, health, banking, religion, and basic necessities.

On-Campus Living Experiences

Results indicate that university students living on-campus experience both positive and negative emotions about their living arrangements. Likewise, they report negative emotions when asked to describe their feelings about off-campus living arrangements. Living on-campus also creates opportunities and facilitates experiences that contribute to the happiness of the dormitory residents, which includes: having meaningful relationships, maintaining balanced student life, meeting basic needs, and receiving social support. The subsequent sections provide more details about the results of the study.

Positive Emotions About On-Campus Living

Being happy for having new friends and spending time with friends. Living in residence halls provides opportunities to meet new friends and develop relationships with them. Given that there is diversity among dormers, participants report feeling excited about the experience of meeting other students coming from different regions of the country. Typically starting off as strangers, student residents tend to bond together and develop friendships. Fellow dorm mates become like family members according to the participants. As they spend more time and activities together, the interpersonal bond strengthens. Then they get to enjoy the company of fellow dormers.

At first, I was sad because I am separated from my real family, but as years passed, living in the dorm could be considered a great experience because living with people of different cultural backgrounds could be a nice learning environment. What feelings do I have now? Happy and thankful! (Male Dormer)

For some, they prefer to live in dormitories because it gives them the opportunity to spend more time with their friends. One female dormer reports, "I feel happy in the presence of my close friends at the dorm – this is one of the reasons why I transferred here." Engaging in healthy relationships with people one lives with determines the life satisfaction among university students (Chow, 2005). More so, social relationship and social support significantly contributes to the overall well-being and identity development among Filipino adolescents (Capeding, 2002; Ramos, 2005; Ramos & Urbi, 2004).

Feeling comforted by the convenience and security of living on-campus. Living on-campus affords convenience and security. Dormers report that they do not have to worry about getting to the University on time, surviving the traffic jams and the inconvenience of public transportation. Not having to travel daily provides great convenience for the participants. One male dormer, who dreaded the daily commute, fears "spending more time traveling than studying." They also find the dormitory rates very reasonable compared to off-campus living arrangements and the cost of commuting every day. Cutting down on expenses is really important for the participants since most of them depend on scholarships.

Given that there is also direct access to shops and services necessary for their university life, dormers find on-campus living arrangement more convenient and helpful for them as students. They also feel secured living within the dormitories. Although they are not excited about the strict rules and regulations in the dormitories, they understand their importance for ensuring safety and security of the residents. Proximity, accessibility, availability of facilities and services, privacy, security and safety are among the pertinent aspects of the living environment that directly affect student life satisfaction (Briliantes et al., 2012; Muslim, Karim, & Abdullah, 2012).

Negative Emotions About On-Campus Living

Getting homesick and sad. Living in a dormitory often means leaving one's family to live in a strange or new environment. It also leads to missing several affordances in life like spending time with siblings, the luxury and convenience of being at home, and enjoying the privacy of your own room or bathroom. Being away from one's family can also be challenging especially for students who live far and who have experienced being separated from their families before. "I often feel homesick... I am from Catanduanes, so far to go home on weekends... I feel alone most often" reports one female dormer. For some, even when you are with fellow dormers, it can still get lonely. Another female dormer reports, "I guess it can't be helped that I feel sort of lonely...I mean you basically share a room with strangers." Others feel sad whenever they get into conflict with fellow dorm mates. The psychological dimension of residential life significantly shapes how students feel about living on-campus (Chow, 2005).

Feeling dissatisfied with living conditions in the dormitories. Since the dormitories are situated in a university with limited resources, a number of the residence halls need major repairs and renovations. To a large extent, facilities have deteriorated. One male dormer shares a disgusted description of his experience:

It was like a nightmare, never will I go back to the University dorm. Comfort rooms are disgusting that I thought I was in jail. No matter how I fake it, I still think that it looks like a jail...Disgust for the facilities, anger for the lack of efficiency, and fear that I might get tetanus or tuberculosis virus from the surroundings...

Sharing communal facilities also causes some inconvenience and dissatisfaction among the residents. Often there are long lines and longer waiting time just to access the toilet and the shower. Delayed repairs of malfunctioning facilities compound the problem.

On campus housing condition can be divided into living condition (referring to the physical/environmental condition) and the living arrangement (referring to the interpersonal ecology) (Chow, 2005). Both the physical and interpersonal dimensions of residential life influence how students perceive the quality of life in university residence halls. Interpersonal conflict among residents is one major source of dissatisfaction. Participants report feeling sad, whenever they have misunderstandings or quarrels with other residents, and whenever other residents have to leave. At times, they feel forced to deal with individuals, whom they do not like nor trust, since they share spaces and activities. For some, they get more bothered if conflicts are not immediately resolved since they affect how they deal with each other.

Feelings about Off-Campus Living Arrangement among Dormitory Residents

When asked how they feel about off-campus living arrangements, the participants reported having negative emotions, namely: getting worried, fear of alienation, and feeling exhausted.

Getting worried. Finding reasonably priced and accessible residence as an alternative to the University residence hall concerns the dormers. They think that advantages of living on-campus outweigh its disadvantages. Alternative housing arrangement, like boarding houses, can be worrisome because boarders tend to be more transient compared those who stay within the university dormitories. One female dormer is concerned about “anyone just coming in and out of my room.” For instance in one local study, students complained problems related to privacy and security in local dormitories (Brilliantes et al., 2012). Private owners of boarding houses may not be able to provide the same security, pricing, and services that University dormitories can. Often the university provides subsidized rates for its dormitories lower than the privately owned boarding houses.

Participants are also worried about living in place outside the University may be less secured. University dormitories have security guards, house parents, and residence hall assistants who attend to concerns and needs of the students. More so, the participants report feeling more safe and secured if they are inside the campus. Alternative housing arrangements often do not have the same services offered by the university.

Fear of alienation. Unlike residents of University dormitories, those living in boarding houses and apartment often come from different universities. They may not share common university life experiences and they do not engage in common activities often organized in university dormitories. One female dormer fears that, "I may not belong or that I may not have close friends." For the participants, they are able to connect easily to fellow residents because they attend the same university, share common institutional identity, and they go through similar challenges as students. Meaningful and engaging social relationships and student activities are critical elements of student development (Capeding, 2002), but these may not be facilitated if students feel alienated from others whom they share residence with, and if they have weak sense of belongingness (Bandelaria, 2005).

Feeling exhausted. Most of the participants find commuting to and from the University to be quite exhausting and tiring. Majority did not experience commuting along urban traffic in high school. A male dormer thinks that "I would feel exhausted of going home everyday...maybe I'd be too tired to even study." The participants think that their time will just be wasted on the road, and they will have less time to study and relax. It can be tiring for them, since they also perceived their academic load to be generally challenging. Generally, students who commute daily risk getting more disengaged as they have lesser time for academic learning, student-faculty interaction, and student collaboration (Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer, 2001).

Factors Contributing to Happiness Among On-Campus Student Residents

Having meaningful relationships. Getting love, care and support from family and peers make the participants happy. With family and peers, they get to share memorable events, do things they enjoy, be themselves, manage critical life events, and find meaning in their lives. The constant encounters and interactions facilitate discovery and awareness of personal qualities – both strengths and weaknesses. They find spending time with friends and loved ones to be both rewarding and meaningful. Social interactions among university students play an important role in facilitating their full development and well-being (Capeding, 2002; Chow, 2005; Ramos, 2005)

Having personal sense of accomplishment and achievement. Student accomplishments and achievements contribute to personal happiness. Participants feel good about themselves if they achieve their goals and see tangible results of their hard work. Sources of sense of accomplishment are varied, ranging from getting good grades, finishing a project, helping others, winning competitions, to conquering one's fear of failure, and contributing to the well-being of their families.

Participants report that their families are part of the reasons why they chose to study in the university and do well as much as they can. The aim of providing for a better future for their family motivates them to work harder and achieve higher. Having a sense of competence and finding meaning in life facilitate contentment with one's life (Arroyo, 1991; Bandelaria, 2005)

Having basic needs met. Participants feel happy if their basic needs (i.e., food, shelter, clothing) are met. Since they live away from their families, having the means and the assurance that they have the money to buy the basic necessities are really important for the students. Most of the time, they have to maximize how they can

budget the monthly stipend they get from their scholarships in order to provide for their own needs (e.g., food, laundry, school supplies, books and photocopying expenses, clothing, and leisure). For some, the little savings they have to be shared with their families to support the latter's subsistence or the education of their siblings.

Managing limited financial resources is one of the major concerns of Filipino university students (Brilliantes et al., 2012). Being aware of the cost of living and finding affordable living options reduces stress and provides a sense of financial security among students. Indirectly, it contributes to student life satisfaction. Likewise, in an interdependent context, being able to help others serves as a source of life satisfaction as well (Diener, 1984).

Sharing social support. As dormitory residents, the primary source of social support are their fellow students, although not necessarily their roommates or dorm mates. They find spending time with their peers, especially close friends or "*barkada*," as fulfilling and rewarding. Through their friends, they get to learn more about themselves, how to help others, and how to survive university life. When faced with challenges and problems, friends provide the most immediate support they need. Social support from peers appears to be the more salient factor of Filipino youth's life satisfaction (Reyes, 2004). Family is also considered as another important source of social support. The words of encouragement from parents, siblings, and close relatives provide inspiration and motivation as students cope with the challenges of academic demands and university life. The assurance of support from family contributes to positive levels of life satisfaction (Bandelaria, 2005; Ramos, 2005) because Filipino university students understand life satisfaction from an interdependent perspective. Filipinos feel satisfied seeing peers and family members happy or just by spending quality time with them.

Conclusion

The quality of higher education is not limited to quality of classroom learning. There is an emerging concern to look at the different aspects of university life that directly influence student engagement, development, and well-being. One particular area that needs immediate attention is student housing, which has received limited attention in local research literature.

Results indicate that living on-campus elicits both positive and negative emotions, which are related to students' evaluation of their well-being. Living on campus provides opportunities for positive social relationships, convenient and secured residential environment. In contrast, it can also be associated with homesickness, sadness, and dissatisfaction due to poor facilities and interpersonal conflicts.

However, compared to on-campus residence halls, students find it more worrisome, alienating, and exhausting to live in boarding houses or privately owned dormitories. Living on campus provides them with more opportunity to focus on academic and related activities. Residential life on campus facilitates students' happiness when they are able to engage in meaningful relationships, develop a sense of accomplishment and achievement, meet their basic needs, and share social support among them and their families.

University residential life among Filipino students needs to be further explored, particularly in the nature of the living conditions (physical aspect) and living arrangements (psychological aspect), and the interface of both aspects. Factors associated with on-campus and off-campus residential life should to be identified and their influence on student engagement and development should be further described.

Student housing has not received considerable attention from Philippine higher education institutions and their regulators, in

relation to quality of life and living conditions of university students. It also has not received sufficient attention in local research literature as a major factor in understanding student engagement and development. Universities are challenged to create a more meaningful and engaging environment for students, by addressing problems and issues that affect student engagement and development, including the quality of residential life for university students.

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