

Caring Behavior of Filipinos toward their Elderly Family Members

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ABSTRACT

The Philippines has an increasingly aging population thereby increasing the demand for healthcare and support from families. Studies showed that the family is the main caregiver of elderly parents/adults as dictated by the Filipino culture of filial piety and respectful behavior towards older people. However, this caring culture is now slowly declining, and Filipino older adults also experience abuse, exploitation, and other forms of neglect from their families. This special article described that the declining caring culture was due to deteriorating family values and societal influences brought about by modernization. This paper also highlights the crucial role of the family and the community in inculcating the preservation of this valued caring Filipino culture, especially among the youth. In cases where senior citizens are being abused and neglected by their families, the state steps in to safeguard the welfare and protection of Filipino senior citizens. Enacted and promulgated laws ensure social justice and protection of human dignity among Filipino older adults as well as the provision of socioeconomic and health needs. In conclusion, the preservation of a caring culture through educating the youth coupled with the implementation of enacted and promulgated laws of the country ensures the quality of aging life among Filipino older adults.

Keywords: older people, elderly, senior citizen, older adults, caring culture

The United Nations and other researchers used the definition of older persons as those 65 years old or more.¹ In the Philippines, the terms 'older people', 'elderly', and 'senior citizen' are used synonymously to define the population group of 60 years and over.² In this paper, older persons and elderly family members are used interchangeably to refer population aged 60 years or more.

The World Population Prospects 2019 predicts that by 2050, older people will make up about 16.5% of the total population.³ In the Philippines, older people are rapidly increasing as compared to the increase in the total population. In 2025, it is expected that 10.25% of the Filipino population will be elderly.⁴ It was projected that Philippines will be ranked with other countries classified to have aging population or having at least 7% of the total population aged 65 years and up by 2032, and aged society or having at least 14% of total population aged 65 years and up by 2069 based on United Nation Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN



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DESA), Population Division report in 2017.⁵ Currently, the latest 2020 Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) survey found that the number of 60-year-olds and above Filipino older people was 11.31% of the total 109,035,343 population which surpassed the 2025 expected 10.25% rate.⁶ This shows a rapid population growth of Filipino older people which can make the Philippines to be classified as either aging or aged society even before the projected years.

The growing number of older persons increases the demand for health care and related support. Older persons frequently have multiple health conditions, require multiple maintenance medications, and/or require more interactions with health care providers.⁷ Visual impairment was the most common disease among the older population, followed by hypertension and osteoarthritis.⁸ Additionally, Filipino older persons experience sensory impairments including hearing loss, cataracts, vertigo, and sleep disorders as well as mental health issues like melancholy, dementia, and anxiety disorders.⁸ According to the 2007 Philippine Study on Aging, half of older Filipinos regard their health as average; however, they have reported functional disabilities and illnesses such as arthritis, rheumatism, high blood pressure, and chronic back pain.⁷ Twenty-two percent of Filipino older persons have trouble accomplishing at least one of the seven activities of daily living (ADL) (i.e., bathing and grooming, dressing and undressing, preparing meals and eating, functional transfers, safer use of a restroom, and maintaining and keeping continence, ambulatory ability, care and stimulation of memory), and the use of transportation to leave home was found to be the most difficult task to do.⁹

To provide some socioeconomic assistance to older persons, the Philippine government enacted legislative policies such as monthly stipend through the social pension program⁷, financial benefits from Social Security System (SSS) and Government Service Insurance System (GSIS)⁷, and mandatory health insurance benefits through the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth)⁷. However, more than half (59.0%) of the healthcare costs are still paid mainly by out-of-pocket money of Filipino older persons and their families while 19.8% and 6.5% are paid by social insurance and the national health department, respectively.¹⁰ This shows that the family remains the financial provider for health needs of the older Filipino population.

More than two-thirds (77%) of financial support for Filipino older persons were from their children, spouses, and relatives.⁸ Aside from financial support, family members, daughters specifically, play a significant role in assisting Filipino older persons in carrying out ADLs.⁹ The caring behavior towards elderly family members demonstrate that filial piety (i.e., honoring, obeying, and caring one's parents, and older family members) is engraved in the values of Filipino families. Filial piety, or the importance of caring for elderly relatives, is an essential component of Filipino culture, as it is in many other Asian civilizations.¹¹ This shows that long-term based care and support to older persons remain to

be the role of Filipino families as stated in the mandates of the Philippine Constitution.¹²

There is an increasing number of research in the Philippines that explore family assistance to older persons focusing on providing financial or material sorts of support and carrying out ADLs with older people,^{9,12} which are all remarkable values in Filipino families. However, analysis on the current status of caring behavior towards older persons is lacking. This is important given the increasing number of older persons being abandoned by their families.¹³ The purpose of this paper was to describe the status of caring behavior of Filipinos toward their elderly family members. This paper is not meant to be a complete review or an overview of qualitative research. It merely provides perspective that may encourage researchers to delve more into the caring behavior toward Filipino older persons.

It is very common that Filipinos show respect toward older persons. This is reflected in the language and gestures. It is usual to see a younger one taking the older person's hand and putting it on his/her forehead at the same time saying "mano po" as a gesture of greeting and an expression of profound respect for elders.¹⁴ On the other hand, Filipinos address female older sisters or cousins as "ate"; their father as "itay", "tatay", or "papa"; their mother as "inay", "nanay", or "mama"; an older female relative or female friend of the family as "auntie" or "tita"; brothers of parents as "uncle" or "tito"; grandparents as "lolo" (grandfather) and "lola" (grandmother); godparents as "ninong" (godfather), and "ninang" (godmother); other older persons as "mang" or "manong" (older male), and "aling" or "manang" (older female) before the name; and use the word "po" when being called, "opo" in saying 'yes', or "hindi po" when saying 'no'.^{15,16}

It is important to note that the family is mentioned in Section 4 article 15 in the family code of the 1987 Philippine Constitution to provide care and support to their elderly family members.¹⁷ The family needs to recognize the rights of their elderly family members and to provide caregiving services to their frail, sick, or bedridden older family members as part of the "neighborhood support services".¹⁸ In addition, the implementing rules and regulations of Republic Act No. 11350, also known as the National Commission of Senior Citizens Act, encouraged the family to reaffirm the valued caring behavior of Filipinos for older persons (section 2 item b) and noted that the family has to care for their elderly family member (section 4).¹⁹ For cases of elderly abuse, exploitation, and neglect, and when the family is unable to support and care for their elderly family members, the government steps in to provide social justice and security of human dignity among Filipino older persons.²⁰ Currently, an Anti-Elderly Abuse Act or House Bill 7030 was filed in congress seeking to protect Filipino older person from any kind of abuse.^{20,21} Lastly, as the lead agency for social welfare and protection of the older population, the National Commission of Senior Citizens (NCSC) ensures implementation of programs and policies for Filipino older persons.¹⁹

Although, even without these legal mandates, Filipino families remain to be the main caregiver of elderly family members. A study showed that Filipino family remains the most common provider of care and support among older person who experience difficulties in carrying out their ADLs and those who are unable to care for themselves.¹² In the Philippine context, the term “Filipino family” is frequently defined as composed of father, mother, and children that extends to some relatives in the paternal and maternal side.²² For a more comprehensive and inclusive definition, significant psychological factors and processes such as family ties, emotional connection, and communication need were proposed to be included in the description of Filipino families.²²

It can be said that the caring behavior for one's elderly family members is among the positive traditions in the Philippines. It is deeply rooted in Filipino society as well as in other Southeast Asian countries thus making it common for the elderly members to live with their families.¹⁴ The Filipino terminology “utang na loob”, refers to the debt of gratitude of children for their parents²³, makes the children morally obliged to care for and support their weak parents when they are not able to care for themselves²⁴. Similar to several other Asian cultures, the filial piety and caring behavior toward elderly family members in their later life are valued among Filipino families, and that neglect of providing care or resources to needy family members is seen as a shameful act, or “nakakahiya”.¹¹ The basic moral principle underpinning filial piety is that older person should be respected and cared for in honor of the sacrifices they made to raise the next generation as well as their contributions to the family and society throughout the years.²⁵

Although they are cared for by their family, Filipino older persons often help their families when they are able. A study found that 34% of Filipino older persons were taking care of a family member.⁸ When asked about their specific role in the family, it was found that 39% were caregivers of their grandchildren. This shows that, even though families tend to their elderly family members, the Filipino older person does not want to be a burden to the family.⁸

The respectful and caring behavior towards older persons has been passed from one generation to another. Unfortunately, these valuable behaviors seem to be steadily fading. There is an increasing number of Filipino older persons being abandoned by their families that is likely to be worse over time.¹³ Francisco et al.¹³ further found that family abandonment is one of the reasons of Filipino older persons to go and stay in a nursing home. Another study noted that the meaning of respect for the older persons has been gradually declining in the Philippine culture as well as in Singapore, Thailand, and Taiwan due to changes in the family structure and role, education system, income, and modernization. Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai²³ elaborated that the fading concept of respect toward the Filipino older persons was affected by several factors. First,

women's employment outside the home causes neglect in teaching children about family values because of her many chores. Second, the education system is lacking in emphasis on morals and family values, and focusing on the teaching of science, dancing, or related skills which have been limiting the young from spending time with older persons. Third, formal schools emphasized the teaching of the English language which has been limiting the youth from communicating with elderly family members who do not speak the English language. Fourth, the increase in earning power of younger people makes them less dependent and less respectful towards their elders. Lastly, the adoption of Western ways from the agrarian way of life brought about by modernization also diminishes the time spent by the youth with the older persons as compared with rural residents.²³ These factors impact how the younger generations treat their older persons.

Another study revealed that instead of receiving care from their own families, some Filipino older persons experience several kinds of abuse such as having unequal rights and privileges as compared to the various societal sectors; experiencing physical abuse inflicted by the family, relative, friend, or even other people outside the family; financial abuse by way of deception, force, misrepresentation, undue influence, or stealing; emotional abuse in verbal forms such as name-calling, mocking, always criticizing, accusing, blaming, or nonverbal forms such as ignoring their needs or presence, silent treatment or avoiding them; and being neglected and unsupported.²⁶ With the increasing number of abandoned Filipino older persons which drive them to stay in nursing homes¹³, noted decline of respect towards elderly family members²³, and several kinds of abuse inflicted by their families and significant others²⁶, caring behavior of Filipino families towards elderly populations seems to be declining. These conditions call for the critical evaluation of the role of family in safeguarding the welfare of Filipino older persons.

It was found that good health status and quality of life among Filipino older persons are improved when the loneliness of elderly family members is lessened and when there is good harmonious relationship in the family.²⁷ A study showed that social interaction and family cohesiveness within the family and with significant others are major elements of a good quality of life among Filipino older persons.⁸ The positive impact of healthy family ties in the general well-being of older family members must be passed on to the next generation. This might potentially be fulfilled when older persons provide a positive example for their children by caring for their aged weak and frail parents responsibly. This is possible since the family plays a very important role in shaping the character and behavior of children.²⁸ Inside the family, morals are initially instilled and it is the place where people are first shaped.²⁹ In addition to the family, the community can also teach family values to younger generation as the community is within the immediate environment that influence the character of the youth.³⁰

Since formal education continues to be an institution that instill morals to the learners,²⁹ caring practices can also be transferred to the younger generation by integrating Filipino family values into the educational curriculum. In 2019, an act was signed into law mandating the Department of Education (DepEd) as the lead agency in implementing the inclusion of Good Manners and Right Conduct (GMRC) and Values Education (VE) as separate course subjects to be taught in Grade 1-6 and Grade 7-10, respectively. Republic Act (RA) 11476, also known as GMRC and Values Education Act, further mentioned that VE should be integrated into the teaching of various subjects in Grades 11-12 under the curriculum of K to 12 basic education.³¹ Integrating good family values related to a caring behavior toward Filipino older adults in the GMRC and VE curriculum is a crucial step to potentially produce respectful and caring younger citizens. This is because the school is recognized as the most significant institution in society for sustaining values for centuries now and authorities consider education as a useful tool to implant and perceive behavior and values within a future generation.³² Schools also offer a moral environment in which society's values and ideas are passed on to learners, allowing them to learn what they can and cannot do.³³ Throughout history, schools have played a vital role in transferring society's common ideals to future generations.³² In the Philippines, the DepEd is the lead agency for basic education from the elementary to high school level.

This paper attempted to describe that the family remains as the provider of care and support to Filipino older persons. However, this paper has several limitations. First, it fails to provide a thorough evaluation of literature that can fully provide all associated care and assistance that all Filipino older persons have access to. Second, it does not provide the definition of caring practices of Filipino families towards elderly family members, such as if caring behavior is limited to assisting elderly family members in their ADLs. Third, this study does not provide a systematic review on the role of family dynamics and healthcare system in assisting Filipino older persons. Fourth, it only focused on sources that were published and written in English. Therefore, unpublished literature, and written in languages other than the English language that may be related to our topic were not included. Nonetheless, this paper may inspire other researchers to delve deeper into specific topics related to care and support to Filipino older persons, such as conducting systematic literature review related to elderly care, exploring on the context of caring elderly family members in the Philippine setting, and inclusion of literature review published in the English language. Studies on exploring the challenges of obliging the family to care for their elderly member as mandated by the Philippine constitution, exploring the perspectives of Filipino older persons on the care and support they received from their families and children, the efficiency of government and healthcare programs and policies in caring and supporting this vulnerable population when families are

unable to care for their elderly members, whether government laws impact the filial piety context of Filipino families, and the need for nursing homes for abandoned older persons and those without families are also important research topics to be explored on. Findings of these suggested topics will be extremely important as added information on care among older persons in the country, which will be beneficial in enhancing healthcare and socioeconomic assistance programs and policies to Filipino older persons.

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