

# The Filipino Well Family: A Qualitative Study Among Selected Families Residing in Mandaluyong City\*

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**Background:** The Filipino family has always been described to have solid household, innate close family ties and high regard to interpersonal relationships. However, there has been paucity of local studies regarding Filipino families and how specifically do Filipinos see, define and perceive a family unit in general.

**Objective:** To explore Filipino family's concepts and ideas of what qualities represent and define a well family.

**Method:** The study was qualitative in design with mixed data collection methods: 18 interviews, 10 Focus Group Discussions, and a literature review.

**Results:** Caring parents, unconditional love, able to maintain a good relationship between family members, constant presence for loved ones and capacity to forgive were reflected as important characteristics of a well Filipino family. Love and respect are considered to be the foundations and faith in God as an important component of a family. However, the wellness of the family begins with husband-wife relationship and that a strong and happy marital relationship will provide mutual support, encouragement and understanding. Likewise, financial capability combined with a commitment to provide for the family's future was a quality believed to bind the family together. Physical well-being and the absence of diseases were also part of family wellness.

**Conclusion:** The nine qualities of a well Filipino family include loving, affectionate, responsible family members; spiritually healthy; has the capacity to provide; having strong husband-wife relationship; effective parents; has a system of open communication within the family; united with flexible family structure; spends time together; and physically healthy with good community life.

**Keywords:** Filipino, well family, qualities

## INTRODUCTION

The Filipino family has always been described to be a solid household because of its inherent ability to face up

against various challenges. Known for its innate close family ties, Filipino families are also renowned to cherish family name, put high regard to interpersonal relationships and religion. Families are part of the big definition of happiness among Filipinos as the unit remain to be the main support of each member in times of financial, personal or health problems.

There has been paucity of local studies regarding how Filipino families see, define and perceive a family

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unit in general. Available literature from other countries had used descriptive words such as strong, resilient or successful to define the well-family as a unit. De Frain, Stinnett and Olson have shown that regardless of cultural variances, strong families would share six major qualities: commitment to the family, appreciation/affection for each other, positive communication patterns, enjoyable time together, a sense of spiritual wellbeing/connection, and the ability to manage stress and crisis.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, YooYoung–Ju described nine factors of a strong family: respect, commitment, appreciation/affection, positive communication, sharing values and goals, role performance, ability to solve problems, economic stability and connectedness with social system.<sup>2</sup>

Resiliency was used by Walsh in 2002 to describe the ability of the family to withstand and recover from disruptive life challenges. Key processes identified for family resiliency included making sense of adversity, positive outlook, spiritual nourishment, flexibility, family connectedness, ability to mobilize social-economic resources, open communication, and collaborative problem-solving.<sup>3</sup> A successful family was likewise described by the US Department of Health as *“adaptable and able to deal with crises in a constructive manner”* but *“not necessarily families that are trouble-free.”*<sup>8</sup>

In the context of biopsychosocial approach in the field of family medicine, the term *“well family”* would be more encompassing and appropriate to use when compared to strong, resilient or successful families used in other international studies. The concept of wellness addresses good quality of life, healthy relationships among family members and the community. Family wellness therefore pertains to the total well-being of the family in all aspects of living. But in what manner does adult Filipinos define and perceived a *“well family”*? Hence, this study explored the Filipino family’s concepts of what qualities constitute and define a well family.

## METHODS

### Study Design

The study was qualitative in design with mixed data collection methods including focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and systematic review of available literature. The research proposal was approved by an Institutional Review Board prior to implementation.

### Study Sites

Study sites were four urban barangays namely Plainview, Mauway, Barangka Drive and Addition Hills of Mandaluyong City, Philippines. Barangay permission to conduct the study was sought prior to actual recruitment and implementation of the study.

### Study Participants

Adult members of Filipino families aged 18 years old and above who are residing in Mandaluyong City, Philippines at the time of data collection were included. Families with members who are mentally incapacitated/ impaired or with members who were living overseas were excluded. Likewise, individuals belonging to families with pre-determined sensitive issues and were unable to attend FGDs were also excluded.

### Data Collection Process

#### *Focus Group Discussion and Semi-structured Interviews*

Guide question for the focus group discussions (10) and interviews (18) were developed based on the study objective. Sessions were started with an open ended question relating to the qualities of the well Filipino family. A well family had been operationally defined based on literature review as strong or resilient. Responses to the open-ended query were then followed by probe questions in order to clarify and review answers of participants.

All interviews and focus group discussions were facilitated by the investigator using the local language (Pilipino). Sessions were documented thru digital audiotapes and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

### *Systematic Review of the Literature*

Literature review was done using systematic database searches of MEDLINE, Embase, Herdin, and libraries of Ateneo (<http://rizal.lib.admu.edu.ph/>), University of the Philippines Diliman (<http://www.mainlib.upd.edu.ph/>), Dela Salle University (<http://www.dlsu.edu.ph/library/>) Philippine elib (<http://www.elib.gov.ph/bsearch.php>), American Academy of Family Physician (<http://www.aafp.org/online/en/home.html>), Philippine Academy of Family Physician (<http://www.thepafp.org/>), Philippine Journal Online (<http://www.philjol.info/philjol/index.php>), Philippine E-Journal (<http://ejournals.ph/>), Australian Institute of Family Studies (<http://www.aifs.gov.au>), Family and Relationship Services Australia (<http://frsa.org.au>) and various journals about family issues.

The following keywords were utilized in the database search: Family, Filipino Family, Well, Qualities, Perception/s, Definition/s, Strong, Resilient and Successful. Grey literature searching among the various family institutions was likewise done.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcripts of the interviews and focus groups were analyzed using content analysis. Three independent persons were tasked to identify key concepts from the transcripts. Related concepts were then grouped into specific categories describing qualities of a well Filipino Family. Themes from responses were summarized using traditional narrative method as how the investigators analyzed and understood the phrases and responses of the selected families.

There were no local articles identified from the literature review. Articles from international publications identified were reviewed to identify concepts used to generate main themes.

## **RESULTS**

### *A Well Family is composed of Loving, Affectionate and Responsible Family Members*

Caring parents, unconditional love, able to maintain a good relationship between family members, constant presence for loved ones and capacity to forgive were reflected as important characteristics. Love and respect were considered to be the foundations of a well family with support and presence in times of crisis as a way of expressing love and affection.

A loving family helped strengthen emotional ties between family members and the expressions of affections include caring, display of concern, interest, and willingness to do things for each other. Love, even when it demanded sacrifice, should not be withheld or withdrawn. It also meant assuring that all family members felt a sense of belongingness and well-being. As such, the expression and manifestation of these feelings will bind the family together.

Loving parents were signs of parental care as support rendered to everyone in the family should be founded on love, respect and affection. Children who were drawn into illicit drug use and other vices were thought to grow up in families where these foundations were lacking.

Family members must also be friends so each can be comfortable to share problems, be understood and accepted.

*You are siblings . . . yet like friends . . .*  
- 39 years old/male

*. . . so that you will be able to share all your problems even sensitive ones to your parents and to your siblings. .*  
- 18 years old/female

*. . . in my experience a well family rests on the wife/mother.*  
- 55years old /female

The role of the wife/mother was highlighted in keeping the family intact specially in times of difficulties

and trials when other members were not doing as was expected. Supportive families understood the need to help each other and to look out for members thus further promoting a setting of openness, support, encouragement and reassurance. Many believed that strong families were the ones who can freely call for help and also be able to receive such needed help. Well families were described as supportive, responsible, with a firm commitment to family roles and had exercised fairness in distribution of duties.

Likewise, respect for parents and older siblings was equally important. Parents believed that children should not be humiliated in front of friends. Often, this event was believed to be linked to having rebellious children.

#### *A Well Filipino Family Should be Spiritually Healthy*

Faith in God was an important component of a well family. Spirituality was described as a cohesive factor and faith promote a stable family structure and function. A prayerful family who entrusted difficulties to God conveyed hope, strength and a sense of contentment in life. It was by having a right relationship with God that all things about the family life fall in its proper place.

*My faith in the Lord is the only thing which sustained our relationship all throughout our lives.*  
- 55 years old/female.

*Having faith in God brought good character, good character brought good relationship amongst us.*  
- 30 years old/ male.

*Material possession is not the only factor which makes a family strong.*  
*Relationship with God is also included.*  
- 65 years old/ female.

Faith in God was given priority in family life because Filipinos believe that the neglect of faith can lead into

serious consequences. It was faith that provide strength to overcome weaknesses and obstacles towards having a well family. Hence, faith in God was and must be the centrepiece of every Filipino family.

*Family should only be second priority in your life.*  
*Faith in God should be put first. My faith in God is my first priority.*  
*I need to put God first before my family in order to have a strong foundation and a strong relationship among family members*  
. - 55 years old/female.

Members of the Filipino families interviewed had described spiritual well-being as having a cohesive, a kind faith or belief and a relationship of acceptance and guidance from God. The connection with God was important in preserving good ties within the family. For most, spirituality started with the parents teaching the children how to pray and fostering a common faith.

*Not only material things, we also need to have a relationship with God to make our family relationship well.*  
-51 years old/Male.

#### *A Well Filipino Family has the Capacity to Provide*

Financial capacity combined with a commitment to provide for the family's future was a quality believed to clamp the family together. The responsibility had been delegated to the paternal head of the family but some think it was a shared responsibility. Parents were considered responsible if both were working hard to find a steady employment and secure financial stability.

The capability to provide adequate food, education and other basic needs for members was part of being a well family. It was thought of as a manner to prevent potential problems and gave a sense of happiness-contentment among family members. Education was considered

necessary and parents must do all they can to send children to school.

*... so as to feed the children well and be able to send them to school . . .  
- 51 years old/Male*

Financial support by parents can continue to extend to the children and their own families as long as nuclear parents were still able to provide.

*As long as the parents are able to provide their (children) needs . . . they will be together as a family.  
- 40 years old/male*

*. . . the family is destroyed because they do not have any means of living . . .  
- 30 years old/male*

#### *A Well Filipino Family Displays a Strong Husband and Wife Relationship*

The wellness of the family had been described to begin with the husband and wife relationship. A strong and happy marital relationship was assumed to provide mutual support, encouragement and understanding. Some members had expressed that the quality of marital relationship affected the kind of family they have because the children saw how happy or dysfunctional their parents were.

Some parents believed arguments in front of the children should be avoided because with positive associations, the children feel happy and inspired to live well.

*The kind of husband and wife relationship determines what kind of family they will have. Their relationship should be first and foremost that of a happy one...  
- 30 years old/male*

Trust was mentioned as an important element in husband-wife relationship because it kept the family together and avert marital arguments. Minor disagreements must be resolved without delay by exerting patience and understanding. Other marital characteristics considered to be essential include a give-and-take relationship, faithfulness, fear of God, open communication and mutual respect. With these qualities, families would learn to accept and understand each other's weaknesses and shortcomings.

*. . . Trust is central in a husband and wife relationship. Without trust, their relationship will not last despite the love toward each other.  
- 32 years old/female*

*Avoid entertaining negative thoughts . . . For example you are far from each other, think of what is positive about your partner, do not think about things which can be stressful, burdensome . . .  
- 33 years old/female*

#### *A Well Filipino Family is Composed of Effective Parents*

Parents were considered to be the major source of strength in the family. Effective parenting meant responsibility, provision of sound guidance and good example as a way of life when children were growing up. Parents should be able to show equal care, love and attention to all children without any preference. It also involved a concrete style of discipline, nurturing, adequate attention and sensitivity on the behavior and unspoken needs of the children.

*. . . the children should be raised appropriately and proper guidance provided to them, lest problems may arise.  
- 66 years old/male*

Provision of all-encompassing parental guidance was perceived to be of greater importance than the ability to

provide financially. For the children, a good measure of effective parenting was how the parents were able to raise children.

*Parents should set the examples to their children.  
– 18 years old/male*

Adolescents sought a friendly relationship with the parents including the ability to share problems and to talk freely about joys, concerns and plans. A reasonable sense of freedom was a felt need that must be provided.

*Don't be too strict if they want to attend parties, allow them.  
But always give them advice.  
Give them words to ponder and guide them.  
– 60 years old/female*

#### *A Well Filipino Family has a System of Open Communication*

A well family should be able to provide a venue for open communication to its members to promote a choice to freely express feelings, dreams, aspirations and difficulties. A family member's worries were considered a concern of the whole family and therefore was deemed a right of each member to be informed. A family decision was and should be a collective decision.

*. . . You can open up your problems .You can tell what  
you like and don't like to your family . . . and also all your  
plans in life.  
- 35 years old/male*

Open communication among family members was believed to avert the feeling of aloneness in facing difficulties and help strengthen efforts towards finding a solution. Communication should be positive, honest and involvement of every family member was vital. Avoidance of unpleasant words that were meant to demean or ignore

were encouraged so each member can speak and express feelings. Every member must be heard because an open communication would increase family togetherness.

*If you will not talk about it, it will lead to discord,  
and you will end having chaotic family, then broken.  
– 45 years old/male*

Two-way communication between parents and children was also believed to encourage sharing of problems, dreams and love interests. Children felt that they should be asked about preferences and if choices seem inappropriate or risky, it can be discussed and explained. Involvement in family matters and problem-solving was supposed to help youth experience and learn.

*. . . it is not appropriate and beneficial to keep on imposing  
upon our children.  
Growing up, they start to form their own world.  
– 48 years old/female*

#### *A Well Family is United with a Flexible Family Structure*

A unified family was described as having similar goals and sharing comparable perspectives in life. When faced with struggles and difficulties, Filipino families regarded it as an opportunity for cohesiveness and togetherness. Being united was regarded as an important coping mechanism against family crises.

*. . . being together as a family . . .  
against difficulties . . . to strengthen the family.  
– 66 years old/male*

The young members of the family felt that it was important to recognize their share and role in establishing a well family. The need to be heard and allowed to participate in family decision making and problem solving was clearly stated. Flexibility was an essential part of family life.

*... Except when the problem is too heavy for us. . .  
but it is ok to share it to us nevertheless. . .  
- 18 years old/female*

*More than finances and other things,  
the most important thing in a family is being together. . .  
-51 years old /male*

*Even when life seems to be difficult, you stay together for  
each other, finding time to talk about the problems. . .  
still together, as one family . . .  
- 45 years old/male.*

For most Filipinos, the well family was the family who stayed united in the midst of trials and difficulties. This was often viewed as an important coping mechanism during difficult times and thus becomes an opportunity to pull in together. The family was able to cope because they were together.

#### *A Well Family Spends Time Together*

Family time and family bonding were the most common descriptions given by the respondents of a family who were spending time together. Filipinos appreciate presence as expressed as being there for each other and being together. Economic capabilities and family orientations influence the way each family spends time together.

*We usually go to the beach, to Luneta Park, to PICC.  
I walked them there.  
Yes, we were together (as a family),  
we brought a lot of foods.  
- 80 years old/male*

Bonding or family time means going to church together, eating out, mall shopping, doing household chores or simply watching favorite television programs at home. For other families, it meant participation in cultural or religious activities and celebrations. Going out together was described as a method to relieve stress and pressures.

Family bonding time was also seen as an opportunity to share each one's problems and steer children away from vices. It provided a good venue for children to share problems, plans and concerns. Likewise, it promoted mutual love as family members feel important and loved.

*What I see in a well family is a time to spend for their  
children and time for her husband and for his wife.  
- 51 years old/male*

#### *A Well Family is Physically Healthy with a Good Community Life*

Physical well-being and the absence of diseases were also regarded as part of family wellness. It meant being able to choose the right kind of foods with less risks for the development of disease. Physical well-being was considered part of having a good quality of life which was an important quality of a well Filipino family.

*... the family is well when they are healthy. . .  
- 65 years old/female*

Families believed how the community viewed the household was similarly important. It was not adequate to have economic or educational status because community life was measured by the relationships with neighbors and participation in community affairs.

*Even to their neighbors, they are able to maintain a  
good relationship in order to become a well family.  
- 45 years old/male*

Good community image was believed to be established by interactions and civic relations by avoiding becoming a burden. Gossiping should be averted as this was the common source of conflict in the neighborhood. There was a shared opinion that the family should likewise be free from the suspicions of misconduct and delinquencies.

A family who showed acts of goodness was thought of as being involved with the community.

*... Interactions with other people ... other people will be able to say that this family is well because they're good to get along with.*  
– 30 years old/male

## DISCUSSION

The results of the study revealed nine qualities of a well Filipino family: loving, affectionate, responsible family members; spiritually healthy; has the capacity to provide; having strong husband-wife relationship; effective parents; has a system of open communication within the family; united with flexible family structure; spends time together; and physically healthy with good community life.

These qualities are similar to the results of studies conducted in other countries. The terminologies used to describe the different qualities were different but the concepts were essentially similar. Unfortunately, the literature review part of the study did not reveal any available local studies about Filipino families at the time of data collection. Hence, the recurring themes were compared with studies abroad and the qualities narrated in the study were based solely on transcripts of responses of selected families during the interviews and FGDs.

The concept of Family wellness which includes good quality of life, healthy relationships among family members and its community was well represented in the ideas and themes described by the respondents in the study. Loving and affectionate family members as qualities were evident since *"Filipinos are by nature affectionate people"*.<sup>4</sup> Love, respect and care within the family were also considered strong factors in order to overcome crises. Furthermore, as the Filipino families are very devout people, religion plays a significant role in shaping the values and norms of the society.<sup>4</sup> As such, attendance to church services and praying together are considered to be essential factors that keep the family close and well.

Some Filipino parents still consider children reasoning or disagreements as disrespectful. However, results showed that young adults and even most parents believe that a system of open communication must be allowed in the family as this will allow free expression of feelings, problems and dreams. Young adults expressed their need for freedom of expression.

Common qualities were noted between the results and the study of De Frain.<sup>1</sup> All six major qualities of strong family which included commitment to the family, appreciation/affection for members, positive communication patterns, pleasing time together, a sense of spiritual wellbeing/connection, and the ability to successfully manage stress were consistent with the themes narrated in the result section.<sup>1</sup> In addition, four extra qualities of a well family were described: strong husband-wife relationship, effective parenting, capacity to provide for family and good community life. The qualities relating to husband-wife relationship and effective parenting are attributed to the fact that Filipino parents are *"very strong role models for their children."*<sup>5</sup> The Filipino family likewise puts high regard on maintaining a good community life as Filipinos are *"accustomed to having a supportive network of family and friends, especially during difficult situations."*<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, the capacity to provide is especially related to the ability of the parents to send the children to school as Filipinos place a high regard on education. Filipinos believe *"that a college diploma is a passport to a better life, not only for the graduate, but for the whole family."*<sup>6</sup>

The concepts of what represent a well family for an average Filipino family is crucial information for family physicians. The importance of family strengths and what concepts define it has also been highlighted in several studies.<sup>7</sup> It has been pursued by researchers from a variety of disciplines, including psychiatry, sociology, psychology, and family marriage counselling.<sup>8</sup> Results from these studies are being used to develop community resources to help the family with problems. It had also been incorporated into nursing care resulting in an enhanced intervention that has helped the families define visions and hopes for the future instead of looking at what factors contribute to



family problems.<sup>10</sup> By learning the different qualities of a well family from perceptions of an average Filipino family will help Family Medicine specialist formulate strategies that can help support and nurture families in crisis.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The study was conducted among middle class, Catholic families residing in one urban city in Metro Manila. The scope limits the ideas, concepts of Filipinos about a well family as such themes can be affected by urbanization, financial capabilities, spiritual beliefs, life cycle stage and educational attainment. However, the ideas and perceptions presented can be representative of an average middle class Family living in an urban setting.

### **CONCLUSION**

The nine qualities of a well Filipino family include loving, affectionate, responsible family members; spiritually healthy; has the capacity to provide; having strong husband-wife relationship; effective parents; has a system of open communication within the family; united with flexible family structure; spends time together; and physically healthy with good community life.

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