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**FEATURE**

## **Living Alone: The Experiences of Married Single Students in Higher Education**

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**Abstract.** *A recent trend among some families who have recognized their inability to sustain the cost of living and studying abroad, has been to send only one spouse to study first. Such situations have given rise to the phenomenon of married single students pursuing advanced studies abroad. This phenomenological study explored the related decision-making process, effects on their families, impact of the students' life abroad and their academic performance. The study focused on six students who had experienced this phenomenon in the Philippines, specifically in two provinces. The results of the study showed that such alternative study period of married single students has a negative impact on their life at school as well as on the family left behind at home. The study also pointed to challenges that the personnel of host universities faced in accommodating the single married students' wish to accelerate their program completion. As coping mechanisms, the participants integrated with the local community as well as the community of their nationality. Coping is also managed through maintaining communication with family through social media, as well as sharing of emotions with fellow single married students.*

**Keywords:** Married singleness, higher education, temporal separation, Philippines, phenomenology, international married singles

### **Introduction**

Employing highly qualified people affords a competitive advantage to any organization. Therefore, employers constantly look for personnel with high academic qualifications and significant career experience (Machin & McNally,

2007). In some contexts, the need of higher academic qualification has resulted in workers going abroad to upgrade themselves. This relatively new trend also has its bearing on the need for preparing employees for the global market—employees who have skills that help to work with people from different cultures and backgrounds (Tillman, 2012).

When families are involved in this workplace-related decision, working couples often find themselves sending one partner for upgrading first with the other remaining back. This arrangement may come with the understanding that the spouse who stays behind would follow the same process after the upgrading completion of the first one. In the host country, this arrangement creates a new phenomenon of students that Wa-Mbaleka (2013) called “international married singles” (p. 68).

Studying abroad offers several advantages to individuals (Paige, Fry, Stallman, Josić, & Jon, 2009). Other than its contribution to professional and personal growth, studying abroad broadens opportunities for global perspectives (Cisneros-Donahue, Krentler, Reinig, & Sabol, 2012). It also assures better future financial stability for the family (Tamas, n.d.). As Tamas identified, studying abroad comes with attractive options such as receiving scholarships, higher quality of education, enhancement of language skills, and diverse cultural immersion. These advantages, together with the demand for higher education in the labor market, tend to push some families to look forward to doing even the impossible.

Often, families deciding to study abroad do not have the financial means for carrying out this decision. In the process, they face the dilemma of having to decide which of the spouses would go for studies first. The typical arrangement has been that one spouse remains back home working and supporting the other financially while the other spouse goes to study. In some cases, the spouse gets study leave without pay while in others, only partial support is provided. Once in the host country, these students face many unexpected challenges (Wa-Mbaleka, 2013). Simultaneously, family members at home often struggle with financial and emotional problems.

This phenomenon of couples alternating their studies abroad is becoming an issue that deserves to be taken into consideration. The time period that one partner spends separately from another can trigger an emotional rift and negatively affect different aspects of life for both the parties, including academic performance of the one studying. Of course, the ideal practice in such cases would be for the entire family to travel abroad with both spouses studying together, provided that they have sufficient means to support themselves. However, this is not the situation in many cases. This study explores the phenomena deriving from the situation leading to married singleness and its impact on studies and on families.

Some studies have been conducted to investigate the living conditions of married single students, their integration, and coping strategies (Joseph, 2015; Wa-

Mbaleka, 2013; Wa-Mbaleka & Joseph, 2013) during their stay in the Philippines. However, these studies did not include couples who alternate study periods or who plan to do so, creating married singleness both abroad and in the country of origin. While the number of international students in the Philippines is increasing (Ateneo De Manila University, 2013), the lived experiences of these students, especially those married singles, are worth probing. Studies, as far as we know, are scarce in this area. The present study attempts to fill this research gap.

Specifically, this study aims to explore the phenomenon of couples (husbands and wives) who alternate the time for advanced studies in the Philippines. To some extent, this research builds on a study published by Wa-Maleka (2013) on the lived experiences of international male single married students in the Philippines. The study had revealed the heart-touching and amazing ways that single married students live challenging lives while they are studying in the Philippines. The lives of many of these graduate students were described as difficult: (a) spending a length of their study period without visiting their family back home, (b) doing the household chores alone, (c) balancing their finances with the needs of their family back home, (d) taking an overload of classes to graduate as early as possible and go home, and (e) living in some uncomfortable conditions. However, some graduate students go one step beyond such difficult study situations. As married couples, they alternate their studies by taking turns to study in a foreign country. The focus of this study was to answer the question: How does the lived experiences of spouses who leave their families behind to study in the Philippines, look like?

### **Review of the Literature**

Literature is scarce on the problems of couples who alternate the time period for advanced studies abroad. It is common to find single students going abroad for studying (Chirkov, Safdar, De Guzman, & Playford, 2008). However, not so common is the fact that married persons could leave the family behind and go to spend several years in a foreign land for studying (Wa-Maleka, 2013). Literature available is related to the ways that generally people perceive studying abroad and advantages of getting a degree in foreign land. Much of the available literature in this area is primarily philosophical, theoretical, and conceptual in essence.

Studying abroad gives a high level of social influence and makes students globally competent (Ludlum, Ice, & Sheetz-Nguyen, 2013; Murphy, Sahakyan, Yong-Yi, & Magnan, 2014;). It also increases the benefits of getting a job abroad (Murray & Fry, 2010). Capella (2012) enumerated the benefits of studying abroad which are “cultural awareness, a sense of fulfillment, and unique experiences” (p. 3). The married single students who go abroad usually expect to get those benefits at the end of their programs (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016).

On the other hand, studies have shown that the international students face many challenges and problems. Harrison and Brower (2011) observed

homesickness among the international students due to the long period of time that those students spend abroad, added to the incapacity of adjusting their cultures to the culture of the host countries. International single students also face some discrimination when studying abroad as confirmed by Wa-Mbaleka and Gaikwad (2013). However, in their study, the married single students did not share any complain of discrimination. More could be explored about married single students and their experiences of studies abroad.

The family alternative period for studying abroad is built on the philosophy of humanism. Biesta (2011) used the philosophy of humanism and post-humanism to inspire and develop moral reflection and a critical thinking among people in the community. When married single students face problems abroad, they take time to reflect on the decision they took before going there. The present study fits into the theory of human needs developed by Maslow (1954), particularly at the levels of love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. The fact of leaving one's family behind for further studies abroad seems to compromise Maslow's pyramid of human needs because it breaks its love and belonging dimensions. Married single students are forced to spend a significant period of time without face-to-face contact and love of their families. That this deficiency of love and belongingness affects the married single students when they are striving to fulfill their academic pursuits, is undeniable. More light needed to be shed in this aspect by looking at the lived experiences of such individuals.

### **Methodology**

This study used a qualitative research. Specifically, it used a phenomenological design. The following sections describe the research design and other methodological aspects of this study.

### **Research Design**

A phenomenological design was used in this study to explore the lived experiences of married singles who are studying in the Philippines. This married singleness for advanced studies is doubly challenging as it is attached to the plan to alternate studies between the couples. In other words, the couples have decided to take turns to study abroad. As this trend is increasingly prevalent in the Philippines, a phenomenological study would better capture the essence of phenomenon.

Phenomenology helps describe, discover, and assign meaning to the experiences of the research participants. Creswell (2013) defines phenomenology as a study that describes the lived experiences of several individuals who have lived a common phenomenon. It aims to return to the concrete, and going back to the things themselves (Groenewald, 2004). This design is the most appropriate for the present study since it explores the shared experiences of married singles who study abroad, leaving their families for a considerable time.

*International Forum*

**Participants, Sampling, and Setting**

This phenomenological qualitative study was conducted in the Philippines. The participants, all Seventh-day Adventists (referred from now as Adventists), were taking graduate studies in the Philippines. Adventists are typically family-oriented, so to see them separated from their spouses and children is uncommon. The participants were selected purposively from both Adventist and public higher education institutions. The main criterion for selection was the phenomenon of married singleness.

The participants of this study were four males and two females who experienced temporal separation from their families due to studies. They came from five countries and had been working for a number of years in their respective countries prior to coming to the Philippines. To keep the anonymity, their countries of origin, their names, and the names of their schools are not mentioned. The names of the participants were substituted by pseudonyms. Five of the participants were working within the Adventist Church prior to coming to the Philippines.

**Research Instruments**

Data collection was carried out primarily using an interview protocol. The semi-structured interview consisted of 12 main questions. The interviews helped to find out the plan that the research participants have for their spouse they left in the home country. During the interview, several sub-questions were raised and also answered. As researchers who are part of an international institution of higher education, we ourselves are accustomed to observing such students and hearing the pleas of married single students who longed to complete their studies as early as possible to go home and join their families.

**Data Collection**

The collection of data followed a systematic and professional procedure that included securing permission to collect data and actually collecting the data. After seeking the permission from the Ethical Research Board of our institution, appointments were made with the participants. The participants were told that participating in the study was voluntary, and the purpose and procedures of the study were explained to them. Upon agreeing to participate, each participant signed an informed consent form.

The interviews were carried out one by one, using an audio-recorder and a notebook. The length of the interviews varied between 20 and 40 minutes for each participant. After each interview, we made a verbatim transcription of the audio recording using also the interview notes. These notes are referred to as field notes (FN) as used in the discussion later.

In addition to the interview, observations also were carried out on how these married singles were living their everyday life. It was interesting to find the participants in their homes and to have a chance to observe their immediate living conditions. We also analyzed research literature regarding family alternative for studies among the married and advantages of studying abroad. Where possible, research literature was also used to triangulate the findings.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began simultaneously with the data collection. The collected data was segmented and coded into meaningful categories using the three phases of Taba inductive procedure of (a) forming concepts, (b) interpretation, and (c) hypothesizing (Green & Henriquez-Green, 2008). This procedure used for content analysis helped in “making sense out of one’s data” (Merriam, 1988, p. 127).

Following the Taba method, data was assembled. We looked for patterns and repetitions in the data. Categories were formed with such emerging groups. Of course, even certain unique occurrences of data were noted. Next, the categories were coded using colored highlights on the transcribed data. Finally, we looked for emerging themes by studying the categories of data.

We did consider quality criteria for ensuring that the study is trustworthy. In this study, we followed the four criteria suggested by Guba (1981): (a) credibility, (b) dependability, (c) generalizability, and (d) confirmability. The criterion of *credibility* checks how research findings matches reality. Member checks and peer review helped in this aspect. For *dependability* which verifies if the findings are derived from data, we used audit trail of explaining in detail the procedures used in data collection and analysis.

*Transferability* of this study refers to the applicability of the study to other situations. The details given in the findings should help the readers to find application in their unique situations. *Confirmability* has to do with corroborating the results. We have attempted to ensure that the data was internally coherent and is supported by the audit trail.

Data analysis resulted in seven themes. These themes originated from the procedure that was described earlier. The following is a description of the results of the study.

### **Results**

The results are based on seven themes: (a) factors leading couples to alternate advanced studies, (b) time that married single students spent abroad, (c) impact on married single students’ wellbeing, (d) impact on married single students’ academic life and school performance, (e) effects on their family back home, (f) impact on host school academic planning, and (g) coping strategies. Finally,

a synthesis of the phenomenon was made. The seven themes that reveal these details are discussed below.

**Theme 1: Reasons for Alternating Studies**

As it appears, it was not an easy decision for the participants to separate because the family would prefer to stay together. Furthermore, if there were to be an opportunity to go together for further studies, that would be ideal. Some of the participants even considered it irresponsible for one of the partners to go abroad for studies while leaving the family behind. The data showed that it was a difficult decision for every participant. The study of this phenomenon has helped understand the reasons behind such decision.

The data indicated that there are three main reasons, which constrain spouses to leave their families behind and come to the Philippines to pursue their education. The first reason given by all participants is their need for a higher academic qualification to increase their employability, especially in institutions of higher learning. Second, three participants said that there were church leaders who are unwilling to send whole families for upgrading simply because they do not want whole families to go abroad. Ironically, some of the participants were church workers for many years, and according to the General Conference of Seventh day Adventist Working Policy (2015), the spouses should not be separated for a period longer than six months. Knowing this policy, church leaders, nevertheless, decide to send one partner, leaving the other and the children in the home country. For leaders to say that there is no money to sponsor both partners is unacceptable since the organization would still continue to support the family back home. In relation to this point, Marry reflected on the cost of sending only one spouse to school by saying, “And they are paying for the upkeep of the family left at home and upkeep for you too” (FN, p. 3).

The third reason, which constrains couples in separating for academic purposes, is the limited financial resources of the family of the students. Three of the participants were self-sponsored and the partners needed to keep working to support both the children and the spouse who is in school. Yet, the other three participants had a limited scholarship, which could barely support all their individual needs abroad. Thus, it was necessary for one spouse to stay back and work to raise money to support the family at home and the spouse abroad.

**Theme 2: Time Spent Abroad**

The duration of time of separation for the family was another issue that came up. This time of separation consisted of two to four years depending on the program of study. Typically, students spend two years for a master’s degree and four for a doctorate program. This is a long time period away from the family.

According to three participants, since they did not have sufficient money, they had no plans of going back home before the end of their program. For the same reason, their partners also could not come to visit them. Paul explained the time of separation in this way: "I sent my wife to study a PhD program for four years and after she was done, she went back home to work and now I am here for four years as well" (FN, p. 2). This means that they would have been separated for eight years in all, due to their studies. That is a great deal of time away from each other. This time would have been cut in half, had they had the means to come at the same time for their studies.

### **Theme 3: Impact on Wellbeing**

The data obtained in this study show that single married students live a hard life in the host country. They try to minimize their expenses by living uncomfortably. Yet, the worst impact is to be separated from their families for so long periods of time. Two participants blamed themselves for having taken the decision to come leaving their families behind. They admitted that maybe studying was not that important or urgent after all. In the first few months, their life of studies was bearable but as time went by, they grew tired of being alone. At some point, they attempted to take overloads as much as possible, in order to complete their studies fast and go home.

Some of the male participants admitted that in the culture they come from, it is not common practice for men to prepare meals. But now, they had no other choice but to do it. Their food was not really balanced. They lived on a survival diet. In case one got sick, they lacked someone to take care of him or her; and it is at a time like this that they most missed their spouse.

Most of the participants in this study had been married for less than ten years. So, they struggled daily with the question of intimacy. They mentioned the worry they had about the spouse left at home remaining faithful to them.

In addition to that, most of them had young children who were just starting to call them "daddy" or "mommy" and their sudden departure for studies left the children wondering where their parent was. In this situation, the participants felt guilty for not carrying out their responsibilities as parents. During the data collection, Mary mentioned that she left her children of 5 and 10 years but was heartbroken by the decision she took. She said,

And at the same time, I had confused emotions because I didn't know how I am leaving the children, I didn't know how to explain to them that I was going to study and I won't come back for a long period. The trip here was a very bad trip for me because I cried the whole night before travelling, the whole day, the whole journey I was crying up to the Philippines. And even at the time of the registration, I was still not sure whether what I am doing is right. And especially if it is right for my

*International Forum*

children to be left at a very young age. My children are 10 and 5 years old. So, I was not sure whether I was doing the right thing for them or I am being selfish and denying them the right to be with their mother. (FN, p. 2)

The motivation, which kept the participants going forward, was the hope of a better future once they are through with their studies coupled with the assurance of being able to add their small contribution to the development of their nation. Also, the completion of their degree program would assure them of maintaining a good workplace position. Another important motivation is that in the Philippines, they access good quality of education at an affordable cost, and they are convinced that what they are studying was worth the separation.

#### **Theme 4: Impact on Academic Life and School Performance**

When asked about the impact of the separation on their studies, all of them indicated that they are unable to concentrate fully on their studies since they are thinking about their families left behind. For two male participants, it gets even worse when they receive news that the family confronts particular problems. These problems they could have easily resolved if not for the distance. One would think that the fact of being free from the disturbance and noise of the children would help them achieve more, but it is the opposite. They all would prefer to be disturbed by the children rather than missing them for such a long period.

Two participants confirmed that even if it separation from was difficult, it does not have so far any negative impact on their own school performance. They did their best to have good grades even though mostly their heart was not in studies. But they felt strong enough to still go on with the studies despite the challenges of the separation from the family.

#### **Theme 5: Effects on Their Family**

Living separated from the family due to studies has a negative impact on the family back home. The families left at home were not at peace since they kept wondering how the lone spouses were doing in the foreign country; especially as stated earlier, considering that most of them had limited financial means. In some cases, the spouses remaining back home were working twice as hard to meet the needs of the family at home and to support the spouse in school as needed. In some other cases, it was the reverse—the one who was studying abroad needed to send part of the scholarship money to the family for support. Josias explained the difficult financial situation in this way:

I was also thinking how I can bring my family here, but because of the high cost of living here I couldn't do it. I have a sponsorship but it is

limited to me not to whole family. The amount is not enough, because there are some requirements I am not able to fulfill. Actually, my sending organization pays the school fees and they give me a small amount for food and housing. A school of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church is sponsoring me. Indeed, the policy is that normally the family should be sent as a whole but as you know, the church leaders sometimes decide otherwise when they judge the money at their disposal is not enough to cater for a whole family. And that's the reason they gave me. The most surprising is that they do not even take care of my family when they stayed at home. It's very hard for my family. That's why it is not easy really to study thinking of my family, the problems they have, how they survive. (FN, p. 1)

In addition, all the participants confirmed that they and their families experienced emotional problems due to the separation. This is a particularly sensitive issue. Participants mentioned about talking to their family and relatives through social media. The emotional pain is much more acute in children since they did not understand why mom or dad had to leave home for a long period. This separation appeared also strongly when the adolescent children start to misbehave and the parent left at home could not handle the issues alone.

Some of these adolescents' misbehavior have affected the family's wellbeing. The parent at home often blamed the one abroad. The idea entertained is that if both parents were present, children would behave better. This idea was confirmed by all the participants when they shared experiences while talking to the family over phone. In some instances, the phone is passed to the child in order for the parent to reprimand him or her.

Some families had planned for a spouse to go to school once the first one is done. Their planning however changed once they had gone through this experience. Considering all the negative impact the long study period had on the family, the family felt obliged to abandon the idea of being separated one more time. Rather, they would start looking at other options for the second spouse to get upgraded or they abandoned the plan. Only one respondent continued with the idea of sending the spouse abroad once he is done with school.

On the positive side, this temporary separation has helped the spouse at home to have a sense of leadership and to grow emotionally. Also, managing life alone helped him or her to be more financially responsible. This is a positive outcome in the sense that being separated from one's spouse prepares the family in case something was to happen to one spouse (sickness or death of a spouse).

#### **Theme 6: Impact on Academic Planning**

As discussed earlier, the married single students were concerned about completing their studies and to go back home as quickly as possible. They would

like to take as much course overload as possible in order to shorten their stay abroad. This created a misunderstanding between students and school program directors. John, who was writing his dissertation and was not yet at the stage of data collection, confirmed that he had only three months more to complete his studies and go home while he was in the phase of proposal defense. He knew very well that the completion of the research within three months was impossible because he should seek the approval of Ethical Research Board committee, conduct a pilot study, test the reliability of the instrument, and work on chapters four and five. He just wanted to express the urgency for his desire to go back home.

Another participant came with the idea of taking an academic program, which would take long; but after realizing how tough life is abroad, he shifted to a shorter program. This shifting from one program to another sometimes affected the academic plans and the financial situation. Since most of these married single students did not have sufficient means, they had considerable debt.

### **Theme 7: Coping Strategies**

The participants confirmed that the first thing that helped them cope was to get integrated into their new community. Another coping mechanism was to have the best possible relation with the locals; this was easy since they are an accommodating and friendly people. Also, in most campuses, there were communities formed based on nationality of the students. So, these married single students joined these sub-communities, which helped them integrate. Also, all the married single students used social media to keep in touch with their families back home. Prayer was also seen as an effective coping mechanism for them. Married single students also found a great deal of comfort in sharing with one another about their situation since they shared the same realities.

### **Emerging Theme: Synthesis of the Phenomenon**

After arriving at the themes, we evaluated the phenomenon of the married single students who desired to alternate their study period with their spouse. It was not the desire of any of the participants to leave their family behind but the circumstances of life forced them to do so. Even if there was mutual agreement with their spouses before coming, the decision to come alone was always painful according to the participants. This result confirms the findings of Walper, Thonnissen and Alt (2015) who found parental separation stressful to the family, especially children. The study also found similar dire living conditions of students studying abroad as described by Joseph (2015) and Wa-Mbaleka (2013).

Related to whether they would consider sending the other spouse who stayed back at home once they are through with their program, five of the participants said that they could not bear to live this type of life one more time. Nonetheless, one of them said that he would do so. The life as a married single student was so

challenging that most of them would not recommend this type of alternate study period to family or friends. Now, they have realized that the unity of the family is much more important than the pursuit of higher learning apart from each other.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The data that were collected through interview, observation, and documentation (from literature) present the lessons on issues, time period of separation, impact, and coping strategies related to the way that married single students perceive the alternative study period. First, the critical factor that led someone to leave the family behind and come alone was their financial situation. It is the same reason that compels couples to think about alternating studies because they cannot cope with the expenses of studying and living abroad together. Such separation creates a painful living experience, which led some of them to abandon their plan of sending the spouse to study in a similar way. Instead of focusing on their studies, these married single students focused on somehow completing as soon as possible so that they could join their family. Nevertheless, they hoped for a better future for their family when they would complete their studies.

This study has shown that the absence of the family had a negative impact on the married single students' academic life and living conditions. The family left at home also shared this negative impact. Even though sponsors may not agree, this study pointed to the possibility that in the end, it costs more to send only one spouse and keep supporting the other one at home. This cost is probably more than financial in nature.

This study has also showed that the time spent abroad alone has negative repercussions on the unity of the family. Being separated from family for two to four years (even up to eight years in one case) affected negatively the family unit. The time spent and the negative impact they experience led married single students to develop new coping strategies.

In this study, the participants indicated that it is better to come to study with the whole family. This would allow the married students to focus on studies and also not rush through their study program. This situation also would most importantly help keep the integrity and unity of the family. This would also allow the married single student to avoid the pain of seeing other families around the campus while their own are so far away.

The married single students wished the universities to help speed the process of thesis and dissertation writing. The study has shown that these married single students particularly need much more support to complete studies faster. Another particular help needed was that of scheduling of classes and course planning. Such situations cause academic advisors and thesis/dissertation advisors undue pressure. The minimum time to complete a doctorate degree is four years, and the Master's degree one year.

The findings of this study resulted in the following recommendations for educational leaders, sponsors, aspiring married single students, and future researchers. For educational leaders and sponsors, they may try to be more generous in allocating scholarships. Serious consideration needs to be made for the families of the prospective scholarship recipient. As this study has shown, the future success and emotional health of the recipients depend largely on the presence of the family during studies. Also, the policies of the sending organization with regards to families need to be reviewed. A counseling office should be available for assisting married single students. Counseling can help students vent out their frustration and also help them learn better ways to cope with this challenge of studying far away from one's family. The receiving school leaders should be flexible in the planning of the courses and the scheduling of classes in order to accommodate married single students who would be in a hurry to complete their program and go back to their loved ones.

Aspiring married single students should be informed of the challenges ahead as part of the planning process. If possible, they should also receive some counseling together with their families in order for all to be prepared for what would happen once the spouse has travelled. Aspiring married single students should be fully informed of the necessary finances to complete the entire academic program. This would help them not to take a decision they would later regret when they run out of funds.

Future researchers could study the situation on the side of the family members left in the home country. They may study the phenomenon of being married single parents while the spouse is abroad. They may also study the impact of a long duration of separation for studies on the family's finances. Studies of students who are part of cohort studies (absent from families for a shorter duration every year) are also recommended. Studies on children coming from families who are part of these separation phenomena and these children's needs in developmental growth especially as related to emotional and psychological domains are also worth exploring.

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