

Understanding Family Dynamics of Children under Stress: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract: This study investigated the children's experiences of the familial stresses as a gauge of looking into their family dynamics. Primary emphasis was focused on the children's psychological functioning in the context of their experienced stresses in their family. Creative expressive approaches were utilized to facilitate data gathering from 3 abused children who were housed in a government facility. The 3 girls suffered physical and/or sexual abuse, neglect and/or abandonment or the combinations of those. Qualitative analyses (genogram and thematic analysis) were employed to make sense of the data. Results suggested that children's experiences of societal stresses can be ranged from intrafamilial (from 'within' the family) to extrafamilial (from 'without' the family). In spite of being under too much stress, children were observed to be authentic "family mirrors": they can precisely measure and showcase the family's dynamics including emotional patterns and overall functioning in an effortless and subconscious ways. This suggested that their experiences of stress seemed to be subliminal – they have a natural way of making sense of their experiences through their sheer ability to catch and understand the emotional contents of the messages they receive from the world, albeit uncritically. Hence, children's behavior (or misbehavior) and ineffective ways of coping from their stressful experiences, tend to be a viable measure in appraising their family's dynamics. Furthermore, it was likewise conclusive that marital relationship seemed to be a pivotal point in the maintenance of the family equilibrium.

Keywords: Family Dynamics, Children, Stress, Creative, Expressive, Phenomenological.

I. INTRODUCTION

Children, regardless of age, naturally find "home" and comfort of the family when the world around them becomes overwhelming. However, stresses from the family often make this rather difficult. This is felt and absorbed subliminally by the children and they tend to act it out in some ways not easily understandable. Children, just by merely being themselves have natural ways of unmasking their families' dynamics and overall functioning due to their "pure spirit" characteristic and genuine innocence. It goes without much explanation that they have a different and utterly unique way of making sense of the world. The child may not understand the world, but s/he definitely catches the emotion. Through the tone of voice, the facial expression, hand gesture and the total body language, the child catches the emotional message even before s/he understands the world. What the young child absorbs in this rather subliminal process are images – the very things that we act unknowingly are caught by the child's ever sensitive antennae. A child absorbs it uncritically and effortlessly and gets the feelings that go with these images. Through this process, children develop sensitivity to their surrounding and form impression on the relational dynamics among the people around. This is best felt and observed in a family setting, no less.

Family is defined as a social unit consisting of parents and the children they rear. As defined, ^[1]Carandang (2015) states that the dynamics and processes of the family members are always interactively shared. Within this definition, for the most part, problems and conflicts may arise which could stun the family from within. In this process, each of its members tends to absorb the stresses subliminally. This can be better understand through the cultural practice among conventional Filipino families who are tagged to carefully not to talk about the experienced problems, thinking and hoping that it would magically go away sooner or later. Within this context, stress is then defined as the environmental events or chronic

conditions that objectively threaten the physical and/or psychological health or well-being of individuals of a particular age in a particular society (^[2]Grant, Compas, Stuhlmacher, Thurm, McMahon, & Halper, 2013).

In the familial context, the whole family system enters a stressful event or situation that has a specific and valuable impact in its dynamics. Each has a part to play because the family is so close that “any stress or pain experienced by one member is felt and reacted to interactively in some way by all the members of the family, in their own ways” (^[1]Carandang, 2015). Thus, the children unconsciously get the messages (conflicts) that the family itself – mainly the parents, are refusing to face openly. This may manifest in the child’s misbehavior patterns which we often perceive to be the child’s own debility. These, more often than not, is a signal for help for the entire family itself. Hence, a more “creative” approach is necessary to help them express themselves.

Much had been written and said about the benefits of play in facilitating the child’s cognitive, social and physical development. Playing is the child’s most neutral and comfortable way of expressing himself and way of being. Play allows the child to feel a sense of power over his environment and to control events rather than be overwhelmed by them. Further, art over the times has been considered soulmate of psychology for its remarkable association of the unconscious to consciousness in the masterpiece. It is the art that psychological processes takes place and find creative expression. ^[3]Carandang (2004, pgs 65-66) suggested reasons and benefits of arts to children and adults: (1) express feelings of fears, lightness and happiness, sadness, despair, pain, disintegration, anger, etc, (2) tell a story of traumatic events; (3) send a message; (4) feel strong, powerful and magical; (5) give a warning in an effort to cope with one’s own fear; (6) mirror family situations like marital conflict, separation, etc.; (7) assure oneself that he will be cared for in the case of abandonment. Finally, metaphors is a symbolic way of helping a child or even an adult see alternative ways of coping with the situation, or at least to “reframe” the situation or see it in a new light. Similarly, values can be implanted through stories in the personality of the child; they can be a motivator for the good and bad behavior, for the sense of well-being, and for coping with difficulties in the future (pgs 79-80). Metaphors are not experienced themselves; they are a way of talking about an experience, so to speak.

This study is anchored on ^[4]Ma. Lourdes Arellano-Carandang’s (1987) Multi-dimensional Rubic’s Cube Approach. This approach perceives the child in four dimensions: (a) “the child as a total person” is the “horizontal” dimension that views the child from the total perspective, that is: as a person having physical, intellectual or cognitive, socio-emotional, and moral or spiritual facet of development. (b) “The developmental perspective” as the second dimension is the “vertical” dimension that understands where the child is in terms of his developmental stage. This also views the children as dynamic being that co-exist with others. The third dimension (c) “the child in context” views the child within the context of the family, community, and culture. The child’s “context” in this study includes important background information regarding the children’s family dynamics in the milieu of various stresses. The fourth and final dimension is the (d) “phenomenological dimension” which forms the underlying basic concept of the children. This looks into the child’s point of view and how he/she sees the world. This dimension is absent in most research studies. Acknowledging the value of the child’s point of view, and remaining faithful to the child’s words is at the heart of phenomenological dimension. This last dimension clinches our understanding of the child’s inner world from an in-depth perspective. It is the integrating inner-core in the multi-dimensional approach.

The study aims to understand the family dynamics of families who are undergoing considerable distress by looking into how the children experienced them. Specifically, the study investigated the family dynamics of the children under stress by delving into the (1) distresses in the family that are experienced by the children; (2) their perceptions on how these distresses beset their family; (3) their feelings regarding the family’s experienced distresses; (4) the behaviors manifested by them as they react to the distresses in their families; and their (5) employed coping strategies to combat the familial distresses.

II. METHODOLOGY

Research DesignThe *Descriptive Study Design* was used to guide this study by using a *Case Study Approach*. Central to this was the examination of human experiences through self-report and detailed descriptions of the phenomenological experiences of the children under stress as a gauge of their family dynamics.

ParticipantsThe participants of this study were 3 children ages 6 to 12 years old from Nueva Ecija Home for the Girls, a designated DSWD Rehabilitation Center in Palayan City, Nueva Ecija. Inclusion criteria are those who are: (a)

experiencing considerable familial distress like neglect, poverty, physical and/or sexual, emotional abuse, (b) lacking of parental control/guidance due to absence or abandonment, and (c) staying in the center for at least 6 months. Of note, this study started with 6 participants but 3 of whom eventually withdrew. All participants were duly selected by the Registered Social Workers of the Center.

Instrumentation

- A. Existing records of the Nueva Ecija Home for the Girls (NEHG) which included Personal Data, Family Background, and Case Background.
- B. *Genogram* trace the subject's family tree to at least three generations. It was used to show the family members' interrelationships.
- C. Creative-Expressive Approaches:
 - a. Drawing, where the respondents were asked to draw a picture of their family using bond paper, crayons, and pencils to elicit information.
 - b. Play and artwork using clay, dolls, and art materials.
 - c. Storytelling using relatable fables and fairy tales as springboard in encouraging the respondents to tell personal stories about their family life.
- D. Unstructured Interview Schedule was devised as a guide in drawing out information from the respondents while using items above as modes of investigation.

Data Gathering Procedures

1. *Seeking permission and defining goals, objectives, and expectation.* This involved defining perspectives on how the study was conducted and established common expectations as to the roles of the researcher and social workers in the process. This was to further clarify the goals and objectives of the study so that everyone understood its purpose. Included in this step is the solicitation of consents from all research respondents and preliminary conversation/interview with the children as part of the rapport building process.
2. *Gathering of the evidences.* This involved the actual collecting of relevant information for the purpose of investigating the family dynamics of the children. Collection approaches are art, play, storytelling, and the use of music. Gathering of data were intermittent among and between all participants within 5 weeks with 3 staggered hours per session per subject per week. Interview questioning was generally "free flowing". Hence, conversations through various techniques varied depending on the child's mood, willingness to participate, and observed verbal and non-verbal cues. Of important note, data gathering among the children often led not just for assessment of their current functioning but also counseling sessions. This was authorized by the center as the researcher is both a practicing Registered Guidance Counselor and Psychometrician.
3. *Presentation of initial findings to the participants:* This was to ensure that the raw data gathered were actually trustworthy on how the participants meant them. Creative approaches were also utilized to facilitate member checking. This also served as a mechanism to check whether the data can be essentially built on the background of the participants.
4. *Closure:* This involves two sub-steps: (1) termination of the data gathering procedures to the research participants by providing necessary tokens as gesture of appreciation and (2) the provision of the final copy of the findings of the study to the center for quality improvement of their rehabilitation program and possible presentation to their stakeholders. Even after this, the researcher was still constantly visiting the center twice a month for another 5 months as part of the gradual termination of relationship with the children. Noteworthy, part of the follow-up were the 3 children who withdrew from the study early on its data gathering phase. This was done to ensure that the conduct of the study will not affect the wellbeing of the children. As of the moment, the researcher still has very strong ties with the center.

Data Analysis

The study used *Thematic Analysis* in understanding the meaning of the descriptions and narrations of the respondents. The goal of the analysis is to learn something about the participants' psychological world. Meaning is central and the aim was to understand the content and complexity of those meanings rather than measuring their frequency.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part I: Social Case History

Case Study 1: Lunesa, 8 Years Old

Personal and Family Background. Lunesa, an 8 years old small little girl, was born on February 14, 2010. She is the baby among 8 children of the family of “Domeng” and “Nita”. She has 8 brothers and sisters, but only 5 of whom are biologically shared siblings. Both of her parents have their own child/children outside their own family as they have their own separate relationship. As a result, her brothers and sisters were distributed between their parents and relatives alike. Lunesa was first given to her paternal aunt and eventually went to her eldest sister’s custody at the young age of 18 whom already had her own family with a 1 year old baby.

Case Background. Lunesa’s sister, named “Isa”, physically abused her for no apparent reasons since they were abandoned by their parents to their aunt who then eventually left them too, leaving Lunesa’s full custody to Isa. Bantay Bata 163 rescued Lunesa on Nov. 24, 2017 due to her eldest sister’s habitual physical maltreatment. Leading to the rescue operation was a concerned neighbor’s report who sought the help of their barangay. Lunesa was beaten up with a piece of wood on her legs, hands and back that resulted to hematoma and a swollen hand. Isa showed no or little remorse to what she did to Lunesa. Because Lunesa has no known caring relatives, she was pulled out from her sister’s custody and transferred to Bantay Bata 163’s Children’s Village, Rosa Masaya Cottage and eventually transferred to Nueva Ecija Home for Girls on January 2, 2018.

Developmental Background. Lunesa was very thin and seemed undernourished. Her height did not match her age. Nonetheless, medical checkups revealed no illness and physical debility. Lunesa failed to enter formal schooling and unable to receive professional academic attention. As consequences, she never learned how to read and write. However, she appeared to be intellectually adept in menial tasks and she seemed to easily adjust to intellectually demanding tasks, according to the center’s volunteer tutor. She had frequent complain of loneliness and seemed confused most of the time and was observed to be worried and she had reported nightmares. Lunesa was first observed to have difficulty in getting along with other kids and got teased a lot. Arguably due to this, she appeared to be withdrawn, timid and aloof. Similarly, she was caught masturbating in multiple occasions based on her anecdotal reports.

Case Study 2: Shiela, 10 Years Old

Personal and Family Background. Shiela is a second child among 6 siblings; she was born on August 7, 2009 in Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija. She grew up in a highly impoverished family and their only source of income was the humble earnings of her father as a farm laborer and has no other source of income. Case records indicated that both of Shiela’s parents have already their own respective other partners now. As a result, Shiela, together with her bigger sister Rose and younger brother April, were left under the custody and care of their 75 year old maternal grandmother with whom she had a close relationship; their other sibling were distributed to other relatives and the youngest was in their mother’s custody.

Case Background. Their grandma was left with the responsibilities to her three grandchildren. She was already weak and has no source of income. She could not provide the food subsistence of the minors and they just depended on the neighbors’ kindness, which were also equally poor. The Captain of their Barangay sought the assistance of CSWDO regarding their predicament. The said agency then referred Shiela and Rose to Nueva Ecija Home for Girls (NEHG) to best serve their needs while the youngest brother, April was left under the custody of their cousin while they’re locating the whereabouts of both of their parents.

Developmental Background. Shiela seemed physically unfit – she looked small than her actual age and seemed malnourished. Fortunately though, she was one of the few residents who were provided with education. Although not as articulate as much as the other girls, she can read and write basic and simple words, able to do basic arithmetic operations, and capable of constructing simplistic sentences. Shiela pitied herself and believed she’s worthless and feared that nobody will provide for her needs. She was observed to be compliant to the rules and regulation of the Center and she can relate

well with her mates. She performed her duties at the center diligently. She was also observed to be playful and have lot of friends to play with and expressive of her personal needs.

Case Study 3: Karla, 8 Years Old

Personal and Family Background. Karla was born on October 29, 2010 in Palayan City, Nueva Ecija. She entered school and finished her Grade I level but unable to continue because of the abuse incidents. She was placed under the Nueva Ecija Home for Girls on February 1, 2017 while the charges against the perpetrator are being process under the court. The family has neither permanent address nor a house to decently live into due to extreme poverty. According to the minor's mother based on the social case report, she separated from her live-in partner (Karla's father) because of his severe irresponsibility and serious infidelity. They separated when Karla was just 3 months old and her mother since then lived-in with another man. From then on, her mother assumed full parental responsibilities of her. Karla's mother worked as a store helper earning only Php. 50.00 per day to support her.

Case Background. Karla was raped by her mother's half-brother named "Bartolo" inside their modestly snug house. Investigation proves that the perpetrator forcibly inserted his penis into her vagina and anus which was supported by a Medico Legal Report. The abuse happened multiple times until her mother noticed the sudden change of behavior of Karla, especially her hostile and aloof attitudes towards her uncle. Based on Karla's accounts, the sexual abuse happened numerously inside and outside their house.

Developmental Background. Karla was physically fit and active and had a fair body type though her height seemed inappropriate to her age. Karla shows intellectual advancement in terms of her reasoning ability and was rather matured in her words and ways of thinking. This was often observed through her constant bickering against her elders and even squabbled against the center's staff. Though she only finished Grade I level, she was quick to learn writing and simple arithmetic operations. In terms of her interpersonal relationships, Karla tended to be very socially aggressive and hardheaded; it was so casual to her to badmouth her mates and others. She would rather insist unreasonably about what she wants and would throw tantrums to win her whims. She was also accustomed to breaking the rules when in conflict with her age mates and even with the social workers and houseparent. Based on the social case report of the center, Karla tended to be sexually aggressive – she sought for attentions through touching private parts of her mates and was also caught masturbating in multiple occasions by the houseparent.

Part II: The Children's Phenomenology

Stresses Experience by the Children. Stresses can be categorized into two; the first is called *intrafamilial Societal Stresses* – problems that arise from 'within' the family system. This includes marital discord/separation, physical and/or sexual abuse, sibling rivalry, favoritism, rejection, abandonment/neglect, and ack/absence of parental guidance. The second is termed *extrafamilial Societal Stresses* – problems that arise from 'without' the family system. This includes poverty, sullen and unhealthy community upbringing, and deprivation of social support. The stresses experience by the children is more formidable and detrimental when it is bound within their own family system (*intrafamilial societal stresses*). Problems that arise within their own family tend to make their situation even more stressful. Thus making their experiences rougher and caused their selves to become more victimized by the dysfunctional family dynamics and disequilibrium of their family system.

Children's Perceptions of the Familial Stresses. The children generally perceive the various stresses they experienced as customary and integrative to their family dynamics and describe their current family situation as unhappy. Despite of the various familial adversities, they were able to utilize positive disposition towards their situation by being optimistic and hopeful. This simplemindedness and blunt optimism of the children significantly contribute to the development of their resilience amidst the hardships.

Floated theme 1: sadness but with hope. Lunesa, 8 years old, depicted her family through her drawing with noticeable two blazing suns, a gesture and symbol of hope and optimism, unbeknownst to her. When asked about her reason/ behind the two suns, just shrugged it off with a smile.



Fig. 1. Lunesa's depiction of her family through

Lunesa, further testified about the relationship she and the rest of her siblings have had with their parents:

“Malungkot kami kasi... nagaaway-away sila mama at papa.malungkot kami nuon pa man dahil may ginagawa kaming masama... Kasi makukulit kaming magkakapatid. Minsan hindi namin sinusunod yung mga sinasabi ni Mama oh kaya ni Papa kaya nagagalit sila... / (We are sad because... Mom and Dad were fighting against each other... We were sad even before because we were doing something bad...Because me and my brothers and sisters were hardheaded. Sometimes we don't do as were told by Mama or Papa which infuriates them).

Floated theme 2: Stress as a common part of their family experiences. Karla, 6 years old, depicted (see figure 2) her “everyday life experiences” in her family; therein, she illustrated (in figure 2) two standing persons on the left represent them when her uncle was still kind and the two overlapping persons on the right was them when the crime is perpetrated on her; on an almost everyday basis.



Fig. 2. Karla's drawing of herself with her uncle who raped her multiple times

Children's Feelings towards the Familial Stresses. In spite of the positive nature of their thoughts and behavior, extreme sadness and feelings of being unloved and uncared for reigned supreme among the stressed children. Ultimately, as brought by their unfortunate familial experiences, they feel alone and rejected. Young as they are, they may not be consciously aware of these kinds of feelings because they are not capable yet of abstracting such emotions as much as adults can. These feelings made them away from the descriptions of normally functioning children.

Floated theme 1: Extreme sadness. All throughout the data gathering phase, the term “malungkot” (sadness) floated consistently across the approaches among the respondents. Sadness is the single most resonating theme among others

Floated theme 2: feeling unloved and uncared for. Even though not specifically verbalized by the respondents, this theme was too strong to go unnoticed in their words, actions, and emotions (or lack thereof). Noteworthy, during one of Sheila’s play, she stated “*ayaw ko magpaalaga kay Ate kasi parehas naming namimiss pamilya naming, kahit hindi nila kami namimiss*”. / (I don’t want to be taken care of by my big sister because we both miss our family even though they don’t miss us). Furthermore, she shared “*malungkot ako nung dinala dito...malungkot ako kasi bakit nila kami dinala dito, kahit naiintindihan ko kung bakit ako dinala dito...*”. / (I was sad when I was put here... I am sad because why did they put us here even though I understand why they put me here...).

Manifestations of Stresses among the Children. Most of the manifestations of the stresses among the children are behavioral in nature. These manifestations indicate their futile and ineffective ways of coping from the stresses which made them an easy and end victim of the family’s failure to function as a system. The effects of those stresses to the children are subliminal and thus gradually taking its toll on them unless properly addressed and guided accordingly in the most efficient way. These are:

- **Anger and resentment.** Sheila mentioned during her sharing about her doll play “*galit ako sa mga magulang ko...nuon pa man kasi iniwan na nila kimi*”. / (I hate my parents... because even before they’ve already abandoned us). She further exclaimed “*mas galit ako kay Mama kasi si Papa nagpapadala ng pera...*” / (I am angrier to Mama because Papa sends money...).
- **Physical, verbal and sexual aggressiveness.** Anecdotal records of the center indicated frequent unprovoked fights involving the respondents. Karla and Lunesa were even reported in multiple occasions of being caught masturbating in the bathroom and under their beds; complaints against Karla for touching sensitive body parts of her mates were also reported.
- **Social isolation.** Even though housed in a shelter with other children of more or less similar or related background, Lunesa and Karla were rather either aloof, hostile, timid or the combinations of these. These characteristics, having understood their case history and background, can be explained as their buffer against potentially draining relationship they could have with others; hence, isolating themselves seemed to be easier for them.
- **Self-mutilating behavior.** Evident cuts and wounds can be seen in the hands of the respondents and other children of the center. As Sheila, 10 years of age defended “*nakakawala po kasi s’ya ng lungkot at tsaka po ng ano...(it eases sadness and something else...)*”. It is important to note, however, that this behavior seemed to be socially learned when further probed.
- **Strong emotional attachments.** Lunesa seemed to have developed transference towards the researcher, she hated it when he talked to other children and seemed to claim ownership of him. This was seen therapeutically as her projected need for a strong parental – specifically paternal, figure to guide her in her development. The other 2 girls also seemed to have developed the same but to a lesser degree. All of which were then dealt therapeutically by the counselor-researcher.

Coping Strategies and Mechanism of Children under Stress

- **Creative Forms of Expression** (playing, drawing, story making/essay writing). Unanimous of the children often tended to play themselves off to carry out the negative feelings they have inside as caused by the stresses; as Lunesa explained “*Naglalaro po para mawala yung lungkot ko...*” / (I will just play to combat my sadness...); this statement was something both Sheila and Karla strongly share, too. Further, the children made use of writing down or drawing out their feelings and experiences to combat the harsh effects of their experienced familial stresses. Drawing, essay writing and most especially playing (either alone or with others) seemed to have helped them most significantly in countering the negative impacts of the stresses on them.
- **Psychological Mechanisms.** In some other sense, in addition to playing, they unconsciously employ strategies through psychological defense mechanisms to cope with the debilitating effects of the stresses and to maintain their sense of self:

- *Distortion*: A gross reshaping of external reality to meet internal needs. Karla explained what she did to overcome what happened to her “*iniisip nalang po namin na walang nangyari sa akin...*” / (*We just condition our mind that nothing really happened to me*), referring to her entire family as “we”, “*ginagawa ko na lang po iniisip ko kasama ko family ko kasi po hindi ko na lang iniisip na hindi ko kasama family ko kasi lalo lang akong masasaktan.*” / (*I am just thinking that I am with my family and I do not think I am without them so I won't feel the pain.*).
- *Fantasy*: Tendency to retreat into fantasy in order to resolve inner and outer conflicts. In one of Lunesa's plays with dolls and toys, she portrayed a dinner of a happy family lovingly sharing sumptuous foods together; she described “*Dito po, hindi na sila nag-aaway- away kasi masaya na sila. Tsaka bawal kami pagalitan ni Mama kasi mahal nya kami*” / (*Here, they were no longer fighting against each other because they were already happy. Mama is prohibited to scold us because she loves us*). In another, yet similar play, she exclaimed “*Buo na yung pamilya namin dito kasi dumating na si Mama at si Papa; mayaman na kami!*” / (*Our family is already whole here because Mama and Papa already arrived; we're already rich!*).
- *Acting Out*¹ and *Displacement*²: ¹ Direct expression of an unconscious wish or impulse without conscious awareness of the emotion that drives that expressive behavior. ² Shifts sexual or aggressive impulses to a more acceptable or less threatening target; redirecting emotion to a safer outlet. Anecdotal records of the center showed multiple reports of brawls among the respondents due to petty reasons. Impressions in the report explained that these were outward manifestations of their pent-up aggressions and hostilities – which arguably have underpinnings that can be traced back down to their experienced familial distresses.
- *Isolation*: Separation of feelings from ideas and events. When Karla was asked about her uncle who raped her, she said “*Hindi ko s'ya gusto makasama [dahil] s'ya and sumusira ng buhay ko...s'ya din yung dahilan kung bakit ako napunta dito*”. / (*I don't want to be with him [because] he ruined my life... he is also the reason why I am here*) – while seemingly intellectualizing it with rather flat affect.
- *Repression*: Process of pulling thoughts into the unconscious and preventing painful or dangerous thoughts from entering consciousness. Though not readily and easily observable, this unconscious process could all be working underneath among the girls. However, one specific instance can be considered a “*suppression*”, a rather more observable variation of repression, when Sheila refused to talk about her grandmother at all, who took care of her while growing up “*basta mahal ko lola ko...ayaw ko po s'ya pagusapan...*” / (*I just love my grandmother... I don't want to talk about her...*).

However these defenses can arguably be considered “functional” mechanisms to some extent among the children under stress. As young as they were, they did not seem to overuse nor deliberately employ the above-mentioned for the sake of refusing or distorting reality, let alone run away from the problem; this can be partly attributed to their lack of sufficient maturity that would enable them to process their experiences more soundly. These strategies are commonly seen to, and lucidly observed in, the drawings and play made and performed by the children.

Implications

The results showed an estimate of the family functioning and overall dynamics through the unique understandings of, and experiences shared by, the children. They provided the emotional patterns of their families in a pure and genuine manner. As ^[4]Carandang (1987) classically coined, the children are authentic and accurate “Family Barometer” – naturally showcasing the emotional functioning of the entire family system. Notwithstanding though, it is also through this very reason that they suffer from the stresses brought by their own family system without them actually realizing it. Thus, they become inadvertently the end-victims along the way. In this context, the children are not the ones who are problematic; rather, it is their families themselves instead. The children, as innocent as they are, were just merely mirroring, in a natural and effortless though uncritical and somehow disabling manner, their families' dynamics and failing systems.

The children's experiencing of the family's stresses is definitely different from one another. They vary in terms of the degree of effects on them, personality factors, diverse coping styles and ways on dealing with and comprehending the stresses. These dynamic stressful experiences of the children varied across time and had its ebbs and flows – they seemed to be okay at a given moment but are volatile to potentially stressful and provoking situation. This means that children do not often consider the problems as ‘problems’ but rather overlook it almost mindlessly but they were able to go through it

somehow. This dynamic process can be called “resiliency” in the context of stressed children (^[5]Bautista, 2012). Resilience, as a protective inner resource, can potentially provide them sorts of natural buffer against the effects of the stresses they experienced in their families. However, this form of resilience among the children still needs to be guided and harnessed in order that it produces them of more helpful and healthier mechanisms.

In addition, there appeared to be an overlapping and reciprocal relationship between the manifestations of effects or impacts of the stress to the children with the coping strategies they employ when they are under stress. It is through the misbehavior patterns (manifestations of stress) where they display temporary escape and relief from the negative emotions they feel have inside – as one of the inevitable consequence of the stresses. In view of this, in an integrative studies conducted by Bautista on 2012, she asserted that children showed resiliency through their coping techniques, which seemed to have a similar result in this study. Young as they were, stressed children often resorts to denial, repression and evasion as their coping strategies (^[6]Trivio, 2012).

Reflecting on the cases and backgrounds of the children, it is thus logical to assume that marital relationship seems to be the focal and pivotal point for the proper functioning of the family system. This is to affirm the classic Systemic Approach’s notion that “the parents are the architects of the family” (^[7]Bowen, 1978). In essence, parents are the pillars that bind the family together and their relationship with their children seems to crucially affect their later capacity to socially interact with the people around them. As ^[8]De Leon (2012 pg 109) reiterate “there is a strong causal relationship between an individual’s experience with his parents and his later capacity to make affectional bonds”. Hence, the quality of marital relationship, as a pivotal part of a family’s overall dynamics, can be estimated and illuminated through the quality of children’s overall functioning.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusions

Considering all the possible implications of the results of the study; the following conclusions are hereby drawn:

1. The children are authentic “Family Mirror”: they can precisely measure and showcase the family’s dynamics, emotional patterns, and functioning in an effortless and subliminal way.
2. The children have sheer ability to catch emotion in an easy though uncritical way. They may not understand the world but they definitely catch the emotional content of the messages.
3. Marital relationship is the pivotal point in the family system and dynamics. The parents are the builder and destroyer of the family; a happy marital relationship will almost always likely to lead to a smooth family dynamics and balanced equilibrium as a whole.
4. Children’s experiencing of stresses is subliminal and dynamic. They might appear normal and functional in in the outside but their (*mis*)behavioral patterns (which serve as the common manifestations of stress) and their ineffective attempts/ways of coping from the stresses they experienced or experiencing signal their inner struggles.
5. Organizing and flourishing the family dynamics may result to healing the wounds of children under stress. It is therefore purported that when the family’s equilibrium is gained back, children’s behavioral problems brought by the family’s distresses will be resolved and addressed.
6. Aesthetic forms of expressions (ex. drawing, play and storytelling and the like) are useful and helpful methodological approaches in studying children. The point is that this informal, personal, and relational manner in which messages are imparted, ideas or opinions exchanged, and the interactive process through which children absorbs lesson and learned values, is more natural and effortless to them.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. The children under stress should undergo a continued in-depth professional counseling and psychotherapy to ease their burdens and work out their inner subliminal predicaments and to help them in developing more responsive mechanisms to improve their resilience. In likelihood, the families are also advised to undergo a family therapy to better understand the nature of their problem and possibly resolve their conflicts as a whole system.

2. The study emphasizes the need for improving marital relationships in concrete and healthy ways. Further, it is very important for mental health professionals to consider the children's point of views pertinent to the family's overall experience of stress, in an attempt to understand the family's dynamics and overall functioning.
3. For the future researchers who will use creative approaches in investigating specific phenomena among children, a wider range of expressions are recommended. Puppetry, bibliotherapy, sand play and other creative techniques may be used to improve the study procedures. In using toys, more comprehensive types and more numerous quantities are advised. In using storytelling, the prose must reflect completely the child's background and situation in order for him/her to relate more intimately; hence, more in-depth data can be extracted.

Author's Note

Very special thanks to the entire staff of the Nueva Ecija Home for Girls, Palayan City, Nueva Ecija for your indispensable assistances in the conduct of this study and for always welcoming me back in the center. Your accommodating treatment is always so inspiring. Special thanks to Ma'am Marivic Framancilla, one the Registered Social Workers of NEHG for proving valuable information and insights that greatly enrich the scholarship of this paper.

May the Almighty Lord shower you all with His endless grace and hundredfold blessing.

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