Transcending Inequality: A Classic Grounded Theory of Filipino Factory Workers in Taiwan

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to develop a classic grounded theory of the main concern of Filipino factory workers in Taiwan and the latent pattern of behavior that accounts for its continual resolution. Nine participants were interviewed and the data were analyzed using the constant comparative method of analysis. The theory that emerged from this study was transcending inequality, which explains how individuals resolve inequality via three overlapping patterns of behavior: coping, bonding, and serving. These behaviors represent a constellation of individual, cultural, social, and spiritual resources. The findings have implications for three areas of practice and policy: (a) local and transnational community life, (b) religious and spiritual practices, and (c) the strength-based approach.

Keywords: Migrant worker, inequality, classic grounded theory

Introduction

Taiwan's population of migrant workers has risen dramatically since the establishment of a formal guest worker program in 1991 (Lu, 2000). By the end of 2012, Taiwan had 445,579 migrant workers, predominantly from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, and Vietnam. More than half the migrant workers were employed in manufacturing industries, with the rest being primarily domestic workers (Council of Labor Affairs, 2012). Rapid economic growth, industrialization, and rising labor costs (Tierney, 2007), as well as social changes such as growth in women's employment, declining fertility rates, and changing job attitudes, especially the aversion to so-called 3D (dirty, dangerous, and demanding) occupations, have increased the demand for foreign labor (Lan, 2000a).

Numerous studies have established migrant workers as a vulnerable and oppressed population. In 2011, as many as 42.4% of migrant workers in Taiwan had not had a single day off (Hsiao, 2013). Many work long hours in isolated or hazardous environments without legal and social support (Wu, 2006). Exorbitant placement and brokerage fees result in debts that can take as long as a year and a half to pay off (Sheu, 2007). Studies have also investigated exploitative

broker and employment practices (Loveband, 2004); unequal wages and benefits (Hsiao, 2013); cultural shock and homesickness (Chen et al., 2011); occupational hazards (Liao, 2011); limited citizenship rights and social participation (Sassen, 2002); discrimination and racism (Lan, 2003); emotional, physical, and sexual abuse (Pan & Yang, 2012); and lack of social service provisions (Lai, 2012). Partly because of these problems, many migrants become undocumented, runaway workers (Lan, 2006).

Even though research has studied migrant workers' psychosocial experiences and analyzed the systemic aspects of migration, less articulated are the resources and strategies used by migrants to mitigate or overcome their environmental stressors (Wong & Song, 2008). Some studies have considered the coping strategies of migrant workers, yet the samples comprised domestic workers. The purpose of this study is to explore the main concern of Filipino factory workers and how they resolve that concern. Gaining knowledge about the resources used by migrant factory workers has direct implications for policy and practice that would contribute to their well-being. Specifically, this study uses the classic grounded theory approach to address the following research questions (Glaser, 1978):

1. What main concern emerges from Filipino factory workers' migration experiences?
2. How do Filipino factory workers continually resolve this main concern?

Methodology

Classic Grounded Theory Approach

Classic grounded theory was used to generate a theory about Filipino factory workers' main concern and its resolution. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews that, consistent with the aims of grounded theory, permitted entry into the perspectives of the interviewees in their own terms.

The aim of grounded theory is to discover the main concern of participants and clarify how participants resolve that concern (Glaser, 1992). Grounded theory is particularly suitable for exploring phenomena not previously examined in depth (Patton, 2001). As a general method, it uses quantitative and qualitative data (Glaser, 2005). Holman (1996) identified grounded theory as compatible with the social work discipline's attention to marginalized populations. In addition, cross-cultural research has benefited from grounded theory's detachment from preconceived ideas and foregrounding of participant knowledge (Sheridan & Storch, 2009).

This study adopted a classic grounded theory approach for its focus on discovering a core variable in the data to generate a parsimonious and well-scoped theory. In contrast, constructivist grounded theory has a more diffuse aim of capturing multiple truths and perspectives through a relativistic epistemology (Glaser, 2002). Furthermore, Strauss' grounded theory is based on a prescriptive data analysis procedure that was incompatible with this study's emphasis on the emergence of participant concerns (Cooney, 2010).

Classic grounded theory is an inductive method of inquiry. The research problem is discovered from the perspectives of the participants to generate theory. To limit preconceived ideas,

full review of the extant literature is deferred until open and theoretical coding are near their final stages of completion (Glaser, 1998). The literature is treated as additional data to be critically analyzed and integrated into the developing theory (McCallin, 2006). Unlike verification studies, the credibility of a grounded theory is assessed by the theory's fit, relevance, workability, and modifiability (Glaser, 1978). The theory is fit if its categories match the incidents being conceptualized. It has relevance if it captures the participants' main concern. Workability refers to the theory being able to explain, predict, and interpret the substantive area under study. Finally, in light of new data, the theory should be modifiable.

Data Sources

This study used a purposive convenience sample of information-rich cases, defined as English-fluent Filipino migrant workers who had worked in Taiwan for at least one year. The participants were recruited at a Catholic social services center. Large influxes of migrant workers attended mass at the center's adjacent Catholic Church. Staff at the center were trained to use a standardized verbal recruitment script to screen and recruit participants.

A total of nine participants were formally interviewed. The median age was 31, all had a high school education or above, and five were female. No participants had previously worked in any other country, with the exception of their own, and they spent a median of four years in Taiwan. The interviews ranged from 48 to 96 minutes.

In addition to in-depth interviews, informal conversations were conducted with a number of Filipino migrant workers, social workers, church staff members, brokers, and employers. I also participated in weekly mass and actively engaged with the attendees. Following the grounded theory dictum "all is data" (Glaser, 1978, p. 8), field notes from these opportunistic conversations and observations were incorporated into the theory formation.

Procedure

After obtaining approval for this study from the University of Washington Human Subjects Division, interviews were conducted from June to September, 2012, in private office spaces at the Catholic social services center. Written consents were obtained prior to the interviews, and participants were informed of the nature and potential risks of the study and advised they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Initial interviews with the participants were focused on specific questions about their migration experiences. However, these preconceived questions interrupted the emergence of theory; therefore, subsequent interviews focused on the participants' main concern and its recurrent resolution. Given the known vulnerability of the participants, the interviews were guided by strength-based techniques to divert attention from challenges, deficits, or problems (De Jong & Miller, 1995). Probes were spontaneously used to elicit depth, nuance, and vividness as well as increase theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Data Analysis

The analytical procedures of grounded theory informed the data analysis. Two types of coding procedures were used to analyze the interview data systematically: (a) substantive coding

and (b) theoretical coding. Glaser (1978) described coding as the process of "fracturing the data, then conceptually grouping it into codes that then become the theory which explains what is happening in the data" (p. 55).

Substantive coding involves open coding and selective coding. In open coding, incidents are compared with other incidents to generate categories that are further compared with new incidents to discover the properties of the categories. This constant comparative method was applied in this research through line-by-line analysis and facilitated by asking a set of questions: "What is this data a study of?", "What category does this incident indicate?", "What is actually happening in the data?", "What is the main concern being faced by the participants?", and "What accounts for the continual resolving of this concern?" (Glaser & Holton, 2004, p. 48). After a core category emerged in the data through open coding, selective coding delimited coding to incidents significantly related to the core category. Finally, theoretical codes were used to conceptualize the relationships among substantive codes (Hernandez, 2009).

Throughout the process of coding, memos were used to note emergent ideas about codes and their relationships. Sorting the concepts in the memos resulted in the final "substantive theory" (Glaser, 1978, p. 144)—a theory about a substantive area of inquiry. Memoing and coding were carried out in ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analytical program.

Results

The main concern of the participants in this study was inequality. The substantive theory of transcending inequality emerged in the data as the pattern of behavior through which individuals can continuously resolve their experiences of inequality. Transcending inequality consists of three overlapping dimensions: (a) coping, (b) bonding, and (c) serving. The theory explains how a confluence of individual, cultural, social, and spiritual resources can be used to address inequality.

Participants' Main Concern

Participants' experiences of inequality, broadly defined as the collection of problems and hardships experienced in the context of transmigration, varied. Some reported having "no problems," whereas others stated they were treated like an "animal" or a "robot." The frequency of reported abuses was significantly higher in the isolated environments of family-owned factories than in larger, corporate-owned factories. All participants suffered from some form of discrimination. The Catholic faith and Filipino cultures of the participants were often misunderstood or regarded with hostility and suspicion (Lan, 2000b).

Working conditions were a major source of concern. Factory work, though naturally grueling, was compounded by long working hours and verbally abusive employers who often expected workers to work overtime instead of taking a day off. Consequently, fatigue was a recurrent symptom. One participant burst into tears as she recounted working for a year without a single day off. Despite working longer hours than Taiwanese workers, migrant workers receive less pay and have fewer welfare or benefits besides their salary (Hsiao, 2013).

Another source of inequality stemmed from brokers—private intermediaries hired by employers to manage the lives of workers. Brokers were described as "harsh," not having "any care." Participants bemoaned excessive brokerage fees that were incommensurate to services provided. For example, inaccurate interpretation services severely hampered workplace communication. Several participants lived in overcrowded dormitory rooms with 36 occupants. The rooms were constantly "dark" to maintain a sleeping environment for multiple work shifts. Electrical devices were prohibited in the rooms, a common source of frustration. Meals did not always accommodate varying shift schedules or cultural preferences. Finally, private and leisure spaces were lacking.

Coping

Coping, the first dimension of transcending inequality, consists of two strategies to deal with inequitable experiences: reframing and questioning. Coping strategies may emerge in the abrupt transition to a different culture or result from a traumatic experience, such as harsh treatment from employers or brokers.

Reframing

Reframing is the cognitive reappraisal of a situation to focus on "future wishes, hopes and aspirations" (Khawaja et al., 2008, p. 507). It discounts inequitable circumstances as having completely negative ramifications, shifting to alternative and positive interpretations. Reframing is often preceded by structural conditions that are perceived as impervious to change; instead of confronting structural causes head-on, reframing chooses to circumvent or internally adjust to the environment. The predicament of landing an unexpected job, for example, can be reevaluated as a professional development opportunity:

> I was expecting that I really [work] in the laboratory in the quality control, so when I was in the production area, 'Oh, no,' I said to myself, 'Oh, no!' It's a very, very big laboratory. Yes, it's a very big laboratory, but I'm already here, so I have to work. . . . Maybe I can bring this experience to go along with the other people, because yes, I was a supervisor before, but I don't have really more experience on supervising or dealing with the production worker or factory worker just like me here, so as of now, I already have to deal with them, so I don't take, I don't take it as negative, in negatively, so I always look forward for the positive one. (male, age 30-35)

Reframing also involves attributing circumstances to luck, fate, or divine power. Individuals may classify being separated from family, having a large sum of debt, or having an unscrupulous broker as being unlucky. Conversely, positive events and circumstances, such as receiving a contract extension, may be viewed as lucky. The framing of events as chance occurrences arises not from superstition but from the unknowability of stressors—not knowing when and where inequality appears. Thus, interpreting events as beyond one's locus of control alleviates the burden of explaining the sudden onset (or withdrawal) of inequality. Reframing under a spiritual worldview has a similar effect. Belief in God's supernatural provisions overlays a sense of control over the unpredictability of inequality. Anticipating the blessings of God—such as the prospect of owning property in the Philippines—provides a way to leverage future prosperity

against present suffering. By ascribing incidents to external causes, reframing accesses resources with which to surmount difficulties, as in the case of believing in divine help, or it adjusts to hardship by subscribing to the view that "fate was out of their hand" (Khawaja et al., 2008, p. 507).

Questioning

Questioning interrogates inequality to circumscribe its reach. It protests the lack of basic human rights through rhetorical questioning directed at bad actors. Whether through pickets, marches, or private gatherings, questioning revolts against the unchallenged status quo of inequality. Less directly, questioning focuses on resolving inequality by eliciting sympathy, confronting individuals by asking them to imagine themselves in another's shoes. Questioning constrains the spread of inequality if there is the possibility of change. It turns into silence if it meets indifference:

> We usually said that we want electricity in every bed, but . . . some of my co-workers said, since 1994, they already ask for that, but until now, they can't give. Every meeting we always talk about that, but nothing's happened. (female, age 20-25)

The frequency and content of questioning may operate along a continuum that varies as a function of structural inequalities in a person's environment. On one extreme, the absence of questioning or non-questioning signals threats to being vocal and the fear of retaliation. Brokers may threaten repatriation with impunity, as individuals lack recourse to an impartial legal system. Alternatively, in an ideal environment, non-questioning would reflect a system that proactively redresses grievances without the need for persistent inquiry.

On the other end of the continuum, one extreme may consist of constant questioning in an open environment such as a church, where there are little structural limitations on the freedom of speech; and another extreme may see a barrage of questioning rising to a form of revolting, typically when the environmental hazards and potential injury to self far outweigh the risks of speaking out. More likely, questioning occurs at meaningful junctures throughout the course of an individual's employment; they are cautiously timed and carefully crafted to elicit an optimal level of change with minimal risk of retaliation.

Bonding

The second dimension of transcending inequality is bonding—the formation and perpetuation of social relationships within and across nation-state boundaries. Putting family first orients the participants away from alienating labor toward meaningful relationships. The participants also form relations that are like family. Underlying both types of relationships is the norm of reciprocity. Bonding stretches social networks, resists exploitative relationships, and alleviates the loneliness of living abroad.

Family

The family, central to Filipino culture and society, serves as "a major source of economic, social, emotional and moral support" (Miralao, 1997, p. 193). A key characteristic of Filipino

families is their size: They include relatives bilaterally, kin reckoned by rituals, and non-kin, such as close friends, who are referred to as kin (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005). These networks of care allow the sharing of hardships and happiness with family members. Distributing care across borders, individuals draw emotional strength from one another: "Okay, I'm happy, because every day, every day, I can talk to my little two children, computer webcam, every morning before I can work, I can talk to my children" (female, age 30-35).

Despite the prominence of family relationships, the strains of transnational family life can result in a balancing act between strong familial bonding and weak familial bonding. Weak familial bonding occurs when individuals are not in a position to deepen their family relationships because of physical distance or workplace barriers. This is especially true of families whose members may be dispersed across several continents or who have infrequent contact with one another. It is also true that some individuals may also elect to focus on new bonds at the expense of preexisting familial bonds. In strong familial bonding, individuals employ creative means to maintain long-distance ties, such as sending *balikbayan* (repatriate) boxes of gifts to loved ones or praying for one another. Familial bonding can be at once fraught with both weak forces and strong forces, potentially placing long-term relationships in abeyance or a state of ambiguity:

> We're no longer, no longer thinking of how we care for each other, but we still care, we still care, but you don't—what are their struggles there, we don't know what are my struggles, they don't know what my struggles are, yes, because when we talk to our family back home or to other country, we always say, "We're okay, we're okay." But sometimes we're not or they're not, because they don't want or we don't want to get them worried, right? (male, age 30-35)

Bonding extends to coworkers, employers, and brokers who are not family by blood but have the potential to become family-like. Idioms of kinship signal a continuous desire to transform hostile, impersonal relations into what one participant calls *malasakit sa kapwa* (having concern for our fellowmen). The appropriation of familial terms to non-kin relations indicates that the family serves as a template or a yardstick against which other relationships are measured:

> So they are very nice to them, my coworkers are very good, they treat me as family. We feel that is not that way hard to work with them so nice to work with them we feel that we have a family there to work in our company. (male, age 30-35)

The Catholic church furnishes the necessary spatial and temporal requirements for forming and sustaining family-like relationships, drawing large crowds of migrants every Sunday. On the one hand, the Church represents the reproduction of communities of origins, hence the use of such similes as "like home" and "like family." On the other hand, the church is a spiritual home by virtue of the common faith of its adherents.

> The people that I [meet] every week, we just sisters, like they become your brother, sister, like Nana [mother] Sandra [pseudonym] is like our already our mother, it's like that, you can what you have in the Philippines you can also have here, it's like you can some many friends, it's like that for every week, I just want Sunday, because I'm with them. (female, age 20-25)

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is the norm underlying bonding relationships. Relations of reciprocity tend to balance and transcend relations of asymmetry (Glenn, 1986). One property of reciprocity is mutuality in communication, which results in a dialogic flow: "We will share and explain us. Somebody would explain us. If we ask, they would explain, then if they ask, too, we would explain. So, it would be fine, the flow will be fine" (female, age 30-35).

Humor frequently animates mutual bonding. Transcending language barriers, it regularizes commonalities, stressing similarities over differences. It also flattens power hierarchies, allowing employees and employers to communicate horizontally on equal footing:

> There's a certain camaraderie between us, it's natural that sometimes she just wants to bully me. She kick me, not kick like this, it's like in a karate class, you know. Um, this one, this part, she kicked my ass, and then I kick her too! (female, age 30-35)

A second property of reciprocity is empathic understanding. Understanding goes beyond communicating in a level plane to having knowledge of the other. Adding empathy to understanding implies a willingness to listen, to become aware, and to assume the position of the other:

> I hope that they [brokers] know about us, and I hope that they know much deeper in us, deeper in us. To know what we feel, like that, and if ever, if ever we may have a problem, they depend us. (male, age 25-30)

A third property of reciprocity is equivalent exchange, which forms the basis for equality with respect to wages, benefits, and rights. This property implies that the input of labor should result in commensurate outputs—rights and freedoms in accord with labor laws—as well as wages equivalent to those of non-foreign workers. Individuals employ this logic of exchange to justify what they should receive as a function of their labor:

> That's why they are unfair to us, yes, every day we working, we are hard, we are hard work, and then we don't, we don't see anything that bad or—but why only one, one, what you call this, only one, one day for this Sunday, they can't give me the chance, the opportunity to come here, to serve here. (female, age 25-30)

Serving

The third dimension of transcending inequality is serving in the context of religious involvement. Serving towards people or God is motivated by opportunities to be thankful, to receive, and to give, which lead to personal and spiritual meaning. The intrinsic rewards of prosocial behaviors and the addition of spiritual resources may be protective against the effects of inequality.

Gratitude

Gratitude is a recurrent expression in the religious experiences of the participants. Individuals may give thanks to God for helping with any aspect of their lives, but particularly experiences in which hardship was endured, such as overcoming the hurdles of working abroad:

> For me, I'm always, because that's one is we the way to thanks, to God, giving me an opportunity to work here in Taiwan because it's very different just work in Philippines and work in abroad. The income is different. (male, age 25-30)

Indebtedness toward God may be a tactic to resisting employer demands, because it dislocates the power that employers have over their employees. Employers may, for instance, dissuade employees from attending church in order to work overtime. However, by continuously asserting a belief in God, individuals may extricate themselves from a controlling order and, in turn, channel their gratefulness into sharing: "That's why I'm sharing to others, you have a time to go to church, why it is, very nice do it just praise thank the Lord blessing, all call just grace good healthy work" (male, age 25-30).

Ministering

Ministering is the act of giving, sharing, and serving others at church. Voluntary ministering involves serving behaviors on the Sabbath, when duties such as serving as commentators, choir members, or ushers are engaged in without obligation or impediments from the workplace. As a form of voluntary overtime service at church, ministering contrasts sharply and thereby resists overtime labor at work:

> Filipinos are generous people you can see. You can see, in the church, there are a lot of—they are generous with their time, right? Actually, the volunteers here in the church, they work six or seven days a week; every Sunday they still find time to serve and give and go to church. Not just go to church, some of them just came from night shift. They work volunteer then stay here for a lot of several hours. (male, age 25-30)

Involuntary ministering is the co-occurrence of the desire to minister and the imperative to work overtime. While the intention to minister remains voluntary, the context in which ministering takes place is involuntarily shaped by a powerful and opposing force. Involuntary ministering therefore lacks the freedom and latitude that voluntary ministering possesses. Moreover, while houses of worship are beyond the locus of control of employers, employers may manufacture on-site worship and prayer centers to control and impose surveillance upon ministering behaviors. Employer demands to work on a day of rest may succeed in securing capital-driven labor, abbreviate the length and quality of ministering, or it may provoke the prioritizing of faith-driven labor as a leverage for maintaining rights:

> Oh, it's Sunday. I don't want to have OT [overtime], because I will going to church. 'Oh, it's okay,' something like my leader said, 'Ah, it's okay.' They already know that every Sunday, I don't want to OT, something like that they understand. (female, age 20-25)

Conscious ministering refers to serving behaviors that are responsive to environmental and structural problems. Ministering in this sense is not only voluntary but consciously focuses on

issues that are relevant to the plight of migrant work. Unlike consciousness-raising and activism, conscious ministering tends to favor spiritualizing rather than politicizing the causes and solutions to social issues. The vehicles of spirituality may include praying or fellowshipping with one's brethren, while the vehicles of politics may include rallying for change or educating others on local laws:

> Because my ministry here is focused also on the rights of migrant workers here, so I had some idea like the labor laws here in Taiwan, so whenever some random Filipino worker has some questions, and if I know something about it, I can share. (female, age 30-35)

Meaning

Serving behaviors are meaningful because of their protective influence against such behaviors as wasting money, wasting time, drinking, and smoking. Besides the Catholic Church, migrant workers have very few community spaces where they truly belong. As Huang and Douglass (2008) observed, the community life of migrant workers is marked by spatial and social exclusion with limited recreational options. Within this contested geography, the church is a site in which meaning can be sought after, as one participant stated:

> Yes, instead of going out and wasting my money, my time in the outside world, why is it not going here and that's my own thinking, why is it, because I can, I can see that we are in need of more volunteers here, so I present myself to be a volunteer here, because I know I have a lot of things to do here than to have our, than to go outside and then waste money, waste time, then going home, sleep, just like toxic, just toxic. Yeah, because it's only Sunday, it's only that day that we can offer to Him, to God. (male, 30-35)

Serving behaviors may cultivate character traits and such competencies as leadership, patience, honesty, camaraderie, and public speaking skills. As a "training ground," the church has the potential to increase the preexisting assets of the participants; it builds on strengths seldom acknowledged in the limiting environments outside of the church setting. In contrast with the demoralizing effects of inequality, which invoke feelings of resentment and dissatisfaction, serving uplifts an individual through service to others: "That's why Nana [mother] Sandra [pseudonym] told me, oh you're different now, you're different now, because before, my first three months, three or four months, I was, maybe I was, my face was so negative" (male, age 30-35).

Serving behaviors may lead to the reduction of stress, happiness, satisfaction, fulfillment, and renewal. Therefore, it transcends both the contexts and consequences of inequality. Serving includes the properties of bonding ("to serve other family"), spiritual influence and reframing ("God is there for me"), and engagement in activities of high personal interest ("I love what I'm doing"):

> Wow! When we get here [church], we are very happy, we forget my six days working day, time is gone like that, I felt that it's a brand new day again when I go back to my house, because it's a remove my stress and renew here, and I feel that we have so many friends there, make you laugh, then have some fun together. (male, age 30-35)

Discussion

The dimensions of coping, bonding, and—to a lesser extent—serving have been discussed in prior studies on Filipino factory workers in Taiwan. The strategy of coping is consistent with research on the resistance and empowerment strategies of Filipino migrant workers (Wu, 2002). The protective influence of Filipino family relations has also been well documented in the literature (Aguilar, 2009). Further, "quasi-family" (Cohen, 1991, p. 201) relations have been found to mitigate work stress through material and emotional exchanges, though a caveat to this finding is that domestic workers are often expected to perform extra duties without additional pay when they are considered family members (Ayalon & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2010). The absence of this contradiction in this present study is likely because of factory workers' clearer demarcation of employer-employee relations, unlike domestic workers who often live with their employers. For both types of migrant workers, there is clear evidence of the strains and costs of family separation (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). The challenges of transnational Filipino parental practices can render the family into "a deep source of stress and alienation" (Wolf, 2002, p. 347). A seldom discussed aspect of migrant workers' social relations is the norm of reciprocity, an ancient Filipino value of historical significance (Hollnsteiner, 1973). Lan (2002, 2003) and Guevarra (2009) have shown that the Filipino value of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) explains migrant workers' ties of reciprocity and obligation. Their findings may explain the link between indebtedness and the dimensions of bonding and serving.

Several studies have investigated the role of religion in the lives of Filipino migrant workers (Fresnoza-Flot, 2010). Such focus on religion is not surprising, given that more than 80% of the Philippine population identify as Roman Catholic (Abinales & Amoroso, 2005). Across the world, Catholic churches have become popular sites of information and social exchange (Hathaway & Pargament, 1991). Many provide targeted social services, including shelters for trafficked or abused workers (Wei, 2010). However, grassroots-level change has not been typically associated with the Catholic church (Cruz, 2006, 2010). On one hand, social activists have criticized migrants' overly "dependent" (Kung, 2005, p. 197) relationships with the Church. On the other hand, Nakonz (2009) has argued that the "very high self-esteem and sense of dignity" associated with religious involvement should not warrant a "disempowered reading" (p. 34). Consistent with the latter interpretation is the concept of serving in this study. Serving exemplifies churches as "a context for building competencies in their members" (Hathaway & Pargament, 1991, p. 84), in which the skills and talents of migrant workers are recognized and developed. Helping others may have increased participants' ability to cope with their own hardships (Lietz, 2011). Furthermore, serving was motivated by and engaged for spiritual meaning. Previous studies tended to neglect the transcendent nature of spirituality in favor of the social or organizational qualities of religion (Henery, 2003; Zinnbauer et al., 1999).

Contribution to Extant Research

The notion of transcending is a new concept in the literature. Productive of a sense of movement, it captures Filipino factory workers' desire to overcome situations of subordination via an ecology of individual, social, cultural, and spiritual assets. Its purchase as a concept lies in its groundedness in the language of the participants. Bonding, for instance, calls for an expanded

understanding of family as a template for relating to all people, irrespective of blood ties. Attending to these strengths and nuances can sensitize researchers and practitioners to ways to increase the preexisting capacities of migrant workers. Transcending is also a paradoxical concept, situated within the constant movement, fluidity, and hybridity of transmigration. The most salient paradox is that not all participants "transcend" their struggles by directly challenging or combating inequality. Congruent with this observation, Constable (1999) found that Filipino domestic workers were "both complicit in, and express[ed] resistance toward, various forms of control" (p. 553). Furthermore, Lee (1995) and Wu (1997, 2002) investigated why Filipino factory workers abstained from action when faced with injustice.

How useful, then, is the theory of transcending inequality if it tends to ignore the underlying causes of inequality? Here I consider a strength-based approach in conjunction with critical realism's "concern with broader social structures" (Oliver, 2012, p. 378). From these perspectives, transcending can be said to constitute a set of practices that disavow the "logic" of inequality—the dialectics of coping and escaping, bonding and alienation, and serving and servitude. Although this logic is not always named, it is, nevertheless, suggestive of power and structure: the "absences, silences, hidden positions and structural discourses echoing through individual accounts" (Oliver, 2012, p. 382). In this sense, transcending approximates resistance, which Foucault (1991) defined as largely consisting of "alternative readings [and] typically avoid[s] any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms" (as cited in Yeoh & Huang, 1998, p. 595). It differs from resistance, however, because it is centered on the participants' potentialities and possibilities, the "core conditions of change" (Saleebey, 2000, p. 130). By honoring broader social structure and individual agency, it is thus possible to locate participant strengths without dislodging the importance of radical social change (Saleebey, 1996; Wang, 2006).

This theory also contributes a spiritual layer of reading of Filipino mobility within larger sociopolitical contexts. Several studies have discussed the political economy of Filipino migration, such as the "power-geometry" of First World countries to control the communication practices of migrant workers (Parreñas, 2005, p. 330), but these studies have not investigated how spiritual practices can subvert such control. For example, the dimension of ministering was shown as a tactic for resisting overtime work during the Sabbath. Class also plays an important role in Filipino migration because of its effect on the type of work that migrant workers can choose from, but oftentimes class is treated as a unidimensional variable that remains fixed or upward mobility is perceived primarily through an economical lens (Fresnoza-Flot, 2010). This theory proposes that serving behaviors can increase the education of migrant workers, potentially affecting their social status and return migration outcomes. The multidimensional training that comes with ministering at church also goes beyond the simple calculus of increased social standing as a function of wealth and assets. Thus, the process of transcending implies that migrant workers' human, social, and cultural capital are malleable and modifiable for positive increases. Finally, this theory can add to our understanding of gender differences in Filipino migration. As the behaviors of coping, bonding, and serving that were uncovered in this study were based on observations of migrants of both genders, it is likely that some of the predicted benefits of this theory are applicable all individuals, irrespective of their gender. Constable (1997) observed that work uniforms for migrant workers "negate the gender identity of the wearer" (p. 550), so it is significant that a sizeable portion of

this theory discusses the dynamics and behaviors of migrant workers on off-days, when uniforms are no longer required. Ministering at church is not without its own set of attires, worn uniformly by both males and females, but their effect likely operates in the opposite direction: increasing the solidarity of male and female congregants. Despite these intriguing observations, a limitation of this study is that the small sample precluded a more theoretically saturated investigation of differences by gender.

Implications for Practice and Policy

The findings in this research are relevant for organizations and agencies interested in enhancing the welfare of Filipino factory workers, including the Taiwanese social work profession; NGOs and faith-based organizations; social activists; and national, municipal, and private agencies that oversee and manage the labor migration process. Three implications are discussed: (a) the significance of local and transnational community life, (b) the significance of religious and spiritual practices, and (c) the strength-based approach.

Significance of Local and Transnational Community Life

Bonding emerged in this study as a source of strength. Maintaining family ties and developing new social relations are important protective factors in migrant workers' lives. One implication of this finding is the need to increase access to spaces for local community life (Yeoh & Huang, 1998). As the participants noted, their dormitories were dark and overcrowded, lacking leisure and recreational spaces. Ancillary to this situation is the need to recognize migrant workers' legitimate use of public spaces. Migrant workers' spatial rights have often been curtailed or have met with local resistance, such as the closure of a migrant worker community center (Wu, 2010) and restrictions on migrant workers' freedom to gather at the Taipei Railway Station (Lok-sin, 2012a, 2012b). These incidents indicate the importance of promoting community spaces and also developing multicultural policies aimed at both minority and majority groups to "achieve an open-minded attitude to cultural differences" (Wang, 2003, p. 249).

A second implication is the need to improve channels of communication between migrants and separated family members (Parreñas, 2002). Factory workers in this study were prohibited from using electrical outlets in their dormitory rooms, thereby preventing them from using communication devices to connect with family members abroad. These policies should be revised to recognize migrants' transnational communities—a critical system of social networks that provides "defense mechanisms for coping with situations of vulnerability" (Canales & Armas, 2007, p. 234). Ideally, migrant workers should have annual leave to return home or, as is the case in Italy, the option to bring family members abroad (Parreñas, 2002), either within the terms of a contract or through channels for permanent citizenship (Lan, 2006).

Significance of Religious and Spiritual Practices

The religious freedom of migrant workers should be respected and understood. Even though the Labor Standards Act guarantees one day off for factory workers, workers are often coerced into working overtime in lieu of attending church. Education should be provided to employers so they understand the importance of religion. Creating private or meditation spaces at the dor-

mitory complex may also lead to more religious freedom for the migrant workers. This theory also suggests that changing the status quo, such as the Labor Standards Act, is an important step in overcoming structural inequalities. For example, there is a manifest need to include domestic workers in the Labor Standards Act so that they can enjoy the same privileges of factory workers. According to the International Religious Freedom Report for 2012 on Taiwan, religious leaders and NGOs raised concerns that the law does not guarantee a day off for domestic workers and caregivers, thus limiting their ability to practice fully their religion (U.S. Department of State, 2012). Modifying the existing law to expand the accommodation of religious beliefs is therefore a pressing need.

Strength-Based Approach

This study's findings indicated that Filipino factory workers are highly resilient in the midst of adversity, warranting a strength-based approach for practice. Practitioners should recognize migrant workers as competent and resilient (Fraser et al., 1999; Saleebey, 1996; Wong & Song, 2008) and attend to the possibility of resistance and rebellion as additional sources of strengths (Guo & Tsui, 2010). A strength-based approach also incorporates client perspectives. For example, the participants of this study have an intrinsic desire to serve their own communities, a natural alignment with community organizing and bottom-up empowerment efforts. Furthermore, the strength-based approach can be encouraged by integrating cultural or multicultural competence into Taiwan's social work education and code of ethics (Hung et al., 2010). Finally, implementing a transnational wraparound model would call attention to migrant workers' families and children, as well as resources in both sending and receiving countries (Furman et al., 2008, p. 500).

Conclusion

The theory of transcending inequality has several implications for practice, policy, and research. Prior research, both within and outside of Taiwan, was focused on the plight of domestic workers, therefore this research provides insight into the relatively neglected migrant factory worker population. A limitation of this study is that the small sample size limited the density and saturation of the study's categories. Future research could verify the hypotheses in this study or develop additional substantive-level theories to add nuance to this study's findings. Results from this study also suggest that policy can strengthen family ties by improving lines of communications or providing for family reunification. Further, social support networks among migrant workers can be nurtured through increased public, communal, and religious spaces. For practitioners, the findings should encourage a strength-based approach, a critically needed counterbalance to the problematizing discourse pervading both the literature and public media's depictions of migrant workers. To coordinate service delivery, social workers could serve as bridges between organizations and nation-states. Finally, this study indicates the need to further the professional knowledge base for multicultural practice with migrant workers.

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