Separation anxiety, adjustment and loss experiences among Overseas Filipino Workers

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Abstract

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) played a crucial role in global labor markets, contributing significantly to the economic development of their homeland while facing unique challenges abroad. This study examines the emotional experiences of OFWs in Japan, focusing on separation anxiety, adjustment, and loss experiences. Grounded on the frameworks of Attachment theory, this research explores how OFWs navigate the psychological challenges of living and working abroad. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, three purposively selected OFWs participated in in-depth interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns in their experiences, revealing common struggles such as homesickness, cultural adaptation difficulties, and emotional distress due to familial separation and personal losses. Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience through coping mechanisms such as maintaining strong family connections, engaging in peer support networks, and developing adaptive strategies for workplace and cultural integration. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, including psychosocial support programs, culturally sensitive mental health services, and initiatives that strengthen family communication. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional well-being of OFWs and inform policies and programs aimed at enhancing their psychological resilience and overall quality of life.

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1. Introduction

Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are often celebrated as modern heroes for their economic contributions through remittances, yet their personal sacrifices are less acknowledged. OFWs are Filipino citizens who work abroad, often in industries such as healthcare, domestic work, construction, engineering, and hospitality. They leave the Philippines in search of better job opportunities, higher salaries, and financial stability for their families, as local employment options often offer low wages and limited career growth. Driven by economic necessity and the hope for a better future, OFWs make significant sacrifices, enduring long separations from loved ones while contributing to both their families' well-being and the national economy through remittances. Many OFWs, facing homesickness and separation anxiety, report anxiety and depressive symptoms, compounded by limited access to mental health care (Garabiles et al., 2019). Prolonged physical and emotional separation from loved ones contributes to chronic distress, loneliness, and attachment issues, which, when left unaddressed, can escalate into severe mental health conditions. The lack of structured interventions tailored to OFWs' unique emotional and cultural contexts leaves a significant gap in addressing their coping mechanisms, resilience, and support systems. Particularly in Japan, where operational mental health programs for OFWs are scarce, there exists a critical gap in addressing separation anxiety, attachment issues, and loss experiences among Filipino migrants (Liem et al., 2021). Additionally, Matsuo (2021) discusses the lack of structured mental health programs for Filipino migrants in Japan, emphasizing their vulnerability to psychological distress due to social isolation, workplace stress, and cultural barriers. The research suggests that the absence of targeted mental health programs contributes to increased psychological distress among Filipino migrants, exacerbating their vulnerability to anxiety and depression.

The study by Suzuki et al. (2020) examined the mental health struggles of foreign workers in Japan, highlighting barriers to accessing support. Their study identifies key obstacles such as language barriers, stigma surrounding mental health, and inadequate culturally sensitive services. Despite the presence of general mental health resources in Japan, these services often do not cater to the specific psychological and emotional needs of migrant workers, including OFWs. Similarly, Van Bortel et al. (2019) focused on stressors faced by migrant domestic workers in Asia, including Japan. The study highlights how migrant workers experience chronic stress due to overwork, social isolation, and limited access to mental health

services. In particular, the study notes that while some mental health resources exist, they are often inaccessible due to financial constraints, work demands, and lack of awareness. Filipino migrant workers, many of whom are employed as caregivers or domestic helpers, are disproportionately affected by these gaps, leading to unaddressed mental health issues such as separation anxiety and adjustment disorders.

A significant number of OFWs in Japan are employed in caregiving, domestic work, factory operations, and the hospitality industry. The demand for foreign labor in Japan is primarily due to its aging population and declining birth rates, which have created labor shortages in industries such as elder care, manufacturing, and service sectors (Suzuki et al., 2020). Filipinos, known for their strong work ethic, adaptability, and English proficiency, are particularly sought after as caregivers and health aides for Japan's elderly population. Others take up skilled and semi-skilled roles in factories, construction, and the food service industry. The Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) and the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa schemes facilitate the entry of Filipino workers into Japan, with agreements between the Philippine and Japanese governments ensuring a steady stream of labor migration (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2022).

Economic hardship, underemployment, and low wages in the Philippines push many Filipinos to seek opportunities abroad. Despite improvements in the Philippine labor market, job scarcity and limited career growth, particularly for skilled workers and healthcare professionals, drive many to seek employment overseas (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020). Japan, with its structured immigration policies and demand for foreign labor, provides an attractive destination. However, despite the economic benefits, OFWs often face challenges related to cultural adjustment, workplace discrimination, and a lack of mental health support. Language barriers and cultural differences further exacerbate feelings of isolation and homesickness, increasing the risk of psychological distress (Van Bortel et al., 2019).

The diplomatic ties between the Philippines and Japan play a crucial role in labor migration. Bilateral agreements such as the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA) facilitate the hiring of Filipino healthcare workers, while government-to-government programs streamline the recruitment of skilled and technical workers. These agreements aim to protect OFWs' welfare and ensure fair labor practices, though gaps remain in providing mental health and psychosocial support. The Philippine Embassy and various non-

governmental organizations offer limited assistance, but challenges persist in reaching and supporting OFWs effectively (Miller et al., 2019).

OFWs are uniquely vulnerable to separation anxiety, attachment issues, and loss experiences due to the prolonged physical and emotional separation from their families, a consequence of migrating alone to provide financial support. Unlike other migrant workers, OFWs often experience intense emotional distress as they miss critical family milestones, struggle with guilt, and bear the pressure of being sole providers (Garabiles et al., 2019). The Filipino cultural emphasis on close family ties amplifies this distress, making homesickness and loneliness more profound compared to migrants from more individualistic societies (Matsuo, 2021). Additionally, in countries like Japan, where culturally sensitive mental health services are scarce, OFWs have limited access to psychological support, leaving them at greater risk of emotional detachment, depression, and anxiety. This study aims to address these gaps by proposing culturally sensitive and evidence-based psychological programs tailored to the unique experiences of OFWs in Japan, promoting their resilience, coping skills, and overall mental well-being. Recognizing the need for targeted interventions, this study proposes the development of a mental health program specifically tailored for OFWs in Kanagawa prefecture.

Separation anxiety has increasingly garnered attention beyond childhood, now encompassing adults like OFWs who fear harm befalling loved ones back home (Avedisova et al., 2018; Dowsett et al., 2020). This manifests as heightened anxiety, physical symptoms related to separation, and a profound need for reassurance. OFWs, grappling with cultural shock and the stress of adapting to new environments, face unique challenges in psychological and social adjustment (Samios et al., 2020; Neto & Neto, 2022). Their emotional struggles are compounded by the loss of familial presence and shared experiences, exacerbating feelings of isolation and loneliness (Silva et al., 2020).

Loss, a universal yet deeply personal experience, profoundly affects OFWs and their families, shaping emotional well-being and family dynamics (Lumicao, 2020; Boelen & Lenferink, 2020). For OFWs, loss is uniquely compounded by long-term separation from family, creating attachment-related anxieties and emotional struggles. The inability to be present during key family events, such as illnesses or deaths, deepens feelings of guilt and isolation. The separation from loved ones triggers attachment-related anxieties rooted in prior experiences of loss, disrupting emotional connections vital to mental health (Stroebe, 2019;

Stroebe, 2021). Understanding these psychological dynamics is crucial for developing effective interventions that support OFWs in navigating separation anxiety, adjustment issues, and the profound emotional impact of loss.

The study of adult separation anxiety, adjustment challenges, and loss experiences among OFWs underscores the urgent need for tailored mental health interventions. Given the unique cultural and social dynamics faced by OFWs, mental health interventions must be designed to address both the individual and familial aspects of their experience. Research suggests that these workers are at a higher risk for emotional distress due to the pressure of fulfilling both financial and emotional roles from a distance (Boelen & Lenferink, 2020). The Attachment Theory by John Bowlby (1998) can be used as the theoretical framework, as it emphasizes the importance of emotional bonds and how prolonged separation from loved ones can lead to attachment-related anxieties, influencing mental health outcomes in OFWs. By bridging the gap between research and practice, this initiative aims to equip mental health workers with new strategies to support OFWs in coping with their unique emotional challenges abroad.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overseas Filipino Workers

The Philippine labor market struggles to absorb the growing number of graduates, with an estimated 800,000 to 1 million new graduates entering the workforce each year (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). Based on existing data, the unemployment rate in February 2023 stood at 4.8 percent out of 51.27 million Filipinos in the labor force (Philippine Statistics Authority, Labor Force Survey, 2023). This oversupply of workers drives many professionals to seek better opportunities abroad, where they can utilize their skills, earn more, and support their families (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020).

With around 11 million OFWs worldwide, the Philippines has been one of the largest labor diasporas, historically second to Mexico, though recent data on this ranking require clarification (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2022). OFWs are highly valued by employers, particularly in industries where they are known for their strong work ethic, adaptability, and high-quality service, such as healthcare, domestic work, and engineering. Their contributions significantly bolster the Philippine economy through remittances, which are instrumental in maintaining currency stability and reducing poverty (Turgano, 2019).

Most migrant workers worldwide face numerous challenges related to cultural adjustment, language barriers, and workplace conditions. However, the experiences of OFWs in Japan offer a distinct case study due to specific socio-political agreements facilitating their migration, the structured nature of Japan's labor programs, and the unique mental health challenges they face. The COVID-19 crisis further strained OFWs' mental health, complicating transnational parenting and communication (Mordeno et al., 2023). This heightened anxiety among OFWs due to employment instability and increased isolation from their families. This study contributes to broader discussions on global labor migration by examining how these challenges manifest among OFWs and how targeted interventions can improve migrant well-being.

2.2. Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety is an emotional condition characterized by excessive fear or distress when separated from a primary attachment figure, typically a caregiver or loved one. It is commonly seen in children but can also affect adults, leading to feelings of unease, worry, and distress when facing situations of separation or perceived abandonment. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5), published by the American Psychiatric Association, classifies separation anxiety as a significant psychological condition affecting many migrant workers (APA, 2013). This manifests as intense anxiety, panic attacks, and obsessive thoughts about separation from loved ones, often leading to impaired daily functioning. The DSM-5's recognition of Adult Separation Anxiety expands the understanding beyond its childhood origins, acknowledging its manifestation in adulthood and its pervasive impact throughout one's life (Patel & Bryant, 2021; Posavac & Posavac, 2017). Adults with separation anxiety experience intense anxiety, and a profound fear of separation from loved ones, often accompanied by obsessive thoughts and physical symptoms that hinder daily activities (Finsaas et al., 2020). These symptoms, which mirror those of generalized anxiety, present challenges in diagnosis. Separation anxiety significantly impacts OFWs by triggering emotional distress and attachment-related fears due to prolonged physical distance from their families. This anxiety can lead to feelings of isolation, guilt, and worry, affecting their mental health, work performance, and overall well-being, as they struggle with the emotional toll of being separated from loved ones for extended periods. Understanding adult separation anxiety

among OFWs is crucial in addressing their emotional struggles and informing mental health interventions.

Adult separation anxiety significantly affects social, occupational, and personal functioning, leading to behaviors like boundary neglect and disruptions in sleep and eating patterns due to separation-related distress. Such impacts can strain relationships, induce social isolation, and jeopardize employment stability. This development is influenced by factors such as early-life adversity, genetic predispositions, and cognitive biases, including negative childhood experiences like inconsistent caregiving (Martinez-Escudero et al., 2020). Left unchecked, it can exacerbate to anxiety disorders and lead to severe impairments. OFWs are particularly susceptible to separation anxiety due to prolonged separations from their families. This separation can result in significant emotional distress and anxiety, as they worry about the well-being of their loved ones back home (Lahousen et al., 2019). Regular communication through technology helps maintain emotional bonds, but it cannot entirely alleviate the distress caused by physical separation (Hofstede, 2020). OFWs and their families often use various coping strategies, such as video calls and sending tokens of affection, to mitigate the effects of separation (Hack-Polay & Mahmoud, 2021).

Research highlights the impact of separation anxiety on parents, particularly those working abroad. Studies indicate that OFW parents can significantly affect their mental health, work performance, and ability to cope with the demands of living and working overseas (Finsaas & Klein, 2022; Ahmadzadeh et al., 2019). The anxiety experienced by these parents can also negatively impact their children's psychological well-being (Finsaas & Klein, 2022). Supporting the emotional health of OFWs and their families through targeted interventions is crucial. Programs that facilitate regular communication, provide access to technology, and offer emotional support can strengthen resilience and help maintain attachment bonds despite physical separation (Silva et al., 2020; Hofstede, 2020). Such interventions are vital for promoting the overall well-being of individuals and families facing geographic distance (Liem et al., 2022).

The recognition of adult separation anxiety disorder in DSM-5 has expanded the understanding of separation anxiety beyond childhood, highlighting its significant impact on adults, especially among OFWs. Effective treatment and supportive interventions are essential to mitigate the challenges posed by this disorder and improve the quality of life for affected individuals and their families (Zarsuelo, 2018).

2.3. Adjustment

Adjustment refers to the process by which individuals manage and cope with environmental demands and challenges. Adjustment issues can impact OFWs by creating difficulties in adapting to new cultural, social, and work environments, which may lead to stress, isolation, and feelings of disorientation. These challenges can affect their mental health, work efficiency, and relationships with family, as they struggle to balance the demands of their job and the emotional strain of being away from home. According to the DSM-5, adjustment primarily involves responses to psychosocial stressors and is considered a crucial indicator of mental health (APA, 2013). Effective psychological adjustment encompasses understanding and accepting changes, revising self-perception, beliefs, and personal objectives, and adopting suitable strategies to address challenges (Samios et al., 2020). This process includes restoring personal, family, and social relationships, and seeking support can lead to more favorable psychological adaptation (Sun et al., 2023). Adjustment also involves occupational adjustments and redefinition of personal roles across various contexts.

Adjustment is multifaceted, involving well-being and functioning in physical, interpersonal, cognitive, emotional, and behavioral domains (Hawken et al., 2018). It entails minimizing distress and promoting positive functioning in daily life. Individuals demonstrating elevated psychological adjustment generally adapt more effectively to stressful environments and display higher levels of psychological well-being (Samios, 2018). Adaptive coping mechanisms, such as problem-solving, seeking social support, and engaging in relaxing activities, play a crucial role in managing stress. Conversely, maladaptive coping mechanisms, like avoidance or substance abuse, offer temporary relief but have long-term adverse consequences.

Emotional regulation is pivotal in adjustment, as it involves recognizing, understanding, and managing emotions to foster healthy functioning. Individuals adept at emotional regulation navigate stressors better, make rational decisions, and sustain positive relationships (Preece et al., 2021). Cultural and contextual factors also significantly influence adjustment strategies. Cultural norms, values, and expectations shape adaptive responses to life's demands, varying across different cultural contexts.

For OFWs, adjustment is crucial as they navigate new environments with cultural, language, and work differences. Acculturation, coping, and integration are interrelated factors essential for their adaptation (Hajro et al., 2019). Organizational culture, social dynamics, and

professional acclimatization play significant roles in their adjustment process. In Japan, OFWs face unique challenges, including language barriers, cultural differences, and homesickness. The Japanese work environment, with its unique customs and societal norms, demands significant cognitive and emotional restructuring (Paillard-Borg & Hallberg, 2018). Coping with stress and establishing a support system are crucial for their well-being. Homesickness, social adjustment, and work-related stress compound the emotional strain, emphasizing the importance of psychological adjustment (Morse & Mudgett, 2017).

Adjustment is essential for OFWs to cope with job-related stress, anxiety, and potential mental health issues. Understanding their adjustment process helps in comprehending the complexities of their relationships at work and with their families (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020). Systemic constraints, such as language barriers, unfavorable working conditions, lack of healthcare professionals, and insufficient social support, hinder their mental health support (Liem et al., 2022). Consequently, OFWs are more likely to experience mental disorders like anxiety and depression, highlighting the need for adequate mental health services in host nations (Fan, 2021).

2.4. Loss Experiences

Loss can take many forms beyond the death of a loved one, encompassing divorce, organ loss, job loss, and health impairment (Patel, 2022). It can evoke a variety of fears and worries, including feelings of helplessness and anxiety about the future, particularly when it involves losing a partner, job, or home. The emotional and psychological impacts of loss often manifest as grief, sadness, and a sense of emptiness, necessitating a process of adjustment (Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014).

Individuals may experience three types of loss: the loss of a significant person, a loved object, or a part of the self (Harris, 2019). The death of a significant person is the most common trigger of grief, deeply affecting those who had a strong sense of identification with the deceased (Garos, 2021). The loss of a loved object, such as a job, status, or place, also carries significant emotional weight, causing financial stress, blows to self-esteem, and uncertainty about the future (De Miguel et al., 2022). Finally, the loss of a part of the self involves losing something central to one's being, such as a body part, physical or mental capabilities, or roles (Gitterman & Knight, 2019).

Grieving the death of a significant person can lead to profound emotional pain, physical illness, and psychological distress (Patel, 2022). Losing a close family member or friend often results in deep grief, characterized by shock, confusion, and prolonged melancholy or depression. Chronic grief, which entails a lifetime of loss and persistent reminders of the departed, differs from typical sadness and clinical depression (Roos, 2017).

Individuals' responses to loss vary based on their personal experiences, familial and social networks, and cultural contexts. While most people eventually cope with their loss, some may experience prolonged or complicated grief, necessitating therapeutic intervention (NCBI, 2022). Social support and healthy coping behaviors are crucial for recovery from loss (APA, 2020).

Job loss, categorized as the loss of a loved object, can lead to grief and depression, with unemployed individuals experiencing higher levels of distress and mental health issues compared to those employed (Cunningham et al., 2022). Unemployment can negatively impact mental health due to increased stress from income loss, reduced social contacts, and the loss of purposeful activities associated with work (De Miguel et al., 2022). Loss extends beyond death, affecting those who experience migration, unemployment, and foster care, among other situations (Doka, 2020). Grief can result from separation from loved ones, incapacitation, or the loss of self-defining roles, highlighting the broad spectrum of experiences that can lead to feelings of loss (Harris, 2019).

For OFWs, loss is a significant aspect of their experience, impacting their emotional well-being and family relationships. The physical and emotional separation from family leads to isolation, loneliness, and longing for connection (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020). In addition to the loss of family members or familiar environments, OFWs also experience a form of loss through their absence from important family events, such as birthdays, anniversaries, or milestone celebrations, which can create feelings of grief and emotional disconnection. This kind of loss is often accompanied by guilt, as OFWs may feel they are neglecting their responsibilities as parents, spouses, or children by not being physically present to support their loved ones during critical moments. Such emotional burdens can contribute to stress and anxiety, particularly when compounded by the challenges of adjusting to a foreign culture and work environment. This often results in mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression, exacerbated by the lack of a familiar support system (Zarsuelo, 2018; Liem et al.,

2022). Addressing these challenges requires tailored mental health interventions and counseling services to support OFWs in coping with their unique experiences of loss.

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Attachment Theory focuses on the deep emotional bonds formed between infants and their primary caregivers. Attachment theory, formulated by John Bowlby (1998), explains attachment anxiety by examining how childhood relationships with primary caregivers shape lifelong interactions (Sanchez-Lopez et al., 2019). These early attachment experiences are crucial for shaping an individual's emotional and social development, influencing how they form relationships throughout life. It is further theorized that the security of these attachments impacts emotional regulation, coping mechanisms, and overall mental health.

The significance of Attachment Theory in this paper lies in its ability to explain how the prolonged separation experienced by OFWs from their families may lead to attachment-related anxiety and emotional distress. The theory helps contextualize the emotional toll of such separations, as the lack of physical proximity to loved ones can activate attachment-related fears, resulting in increased vulnerability to stress, loneliness, and depression. By understanding OFWs' emotional struggles through the lens of Attachment Theory, the paper emphasizes the need for tailored mental health interventions that address these attachment disruptions and provide effective coping strategies for OFWs to manage the emotional challenges of separation.

While the theory has been foundational in understanding the role of early bonds in shaping behavior, it has also been critiqued for its potential oversimplification of complex human relationships. Bowlby's initial focus on young children has been expanded to include adult behavior (Ahmetoglu et al., 2018), but some critics argue that attachment patterns may not always neatly map across developmental stages or contexts. Bowlby, observed that infants separated from their parents exhibited behaviors like crying and clinging, which he argued were adaptive responses for survival (Girme et al., 2018). These behaviors, according to Bowlby, are part of an attachment behavioral system that evolved to ensure infants remain close to caregivers who provide support and protection (Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2021; Divecha, 2017). However, critics highlight the limited scope of this survival-focused view, especially given the diverse caregiving structures seen across cultures and societies. Cultural variability in attachment behaviors calls into question the universality of Bowlby's attachment

classifications, suggesting that attachment responses may be influenced by cultural norms and expectations (Kobak & Bosmans, 2019).

Mary Ainsworth's research furthered the theory by categorizing infant attachment patterns into secure, anxious-resistant, and anxious-avoidant types, highlighting the importance of parental responsiveness in shaping attachment security (Kobak & Bosmans, 2019). Yet, while these categories offer useful frameworks, they risk oversimplifying the nuanced ways in which individuals interact with their caregivers. Furthermore, contemporary debates suggest that attachment theory needs to account for the interplay between biological predispositions and environmental factors, as well as the influence of societal structures on caregiving practices. These factors can shape attachment experiences in ways that challenge the binary classifications of attachment styles (Marrero-Quevedo et al., 2018).

Bowlby suggested that early attachment experiences influence adult attachment styles, identifying four main types: secure, anxious, avoidant, and disorganized (Marrero-Quevedo et al., 2018). Secure attachment is characterized by trust and comfort in relationships, stemming from supportive caregiving in childhood (Divecha, 2017; Molero et al., 2017). However, this model does not fully capture the range of adult attachment dynamics, especially in contexts where individuals may have experienced diverse caregiving or relational environments. Anxious attachment involves a fear of abandonment and a need for constant reassurance, often resulting from inconsistent caregiving (Kobak & Bosmans, 2019), but such patterns may also arise from broader social and environmental stressors.

Avoidant attachment is marked by emotional distance and self-reliance, typically due to emotionally unavailable caregivers (Garrett, 2023; Lafrance et al., 2020). Yet, this view does not always account for the complexities of adult attachment, where emotional distance may also result from other factors, such as societal pressures or trauma, that influence an individual's relational patterns. Disorganized attachment combines conflicting behaviors and emotions, often linked to traumatic or unpredictable caregiving (Calvo et al., 2020), but contemporary discussions urge further exploration of how societal and cultural factors, as well as systemic inequalities, shape these attachment dynamics.

The application of attachment theory to the experiences of OFWs offers a compelling case for understanding how attachment disruptions affect individuals in cross-cultural and socio-economic contexts. These workers often face long-term separations from their families, which may challenge the traditional attachment model that emphasizes proximity and constant

availability of caregivers. The socio-economic pressures OFWs face, such as working in unfamiliar and sometimes hostile environments, can exacerbate attachment-related distress and disrupt their ability to maintain secure emotional bonds.

From an attachment perspective, the absence of consistent caregiving—due to migration for work—can lead to the development of anxious attachment patterns, where individuals may fear abandonment or experience heightened insecurity due to the emotional distance between them and their children or partners (Girma et al., 2018; Divecha, 2017). However, OFWs often continue to maintain relationships through digital communication, which may modify the classic model by allowing some level of "virtual proximity." This creates an opportunity to examine the evolving nature of attachment in the face of modern technology and cultural shifts.

Culturally, attachment behaviors may be shaped by the collectivist values common in Filipino society, where family cohesion is highly valued. The sacrifice of an OFW's presence, often seen as a sacrifice for the family's financial well-being, may add a layer of complexity to the attachment experience. This could lead to what is referred to as "familial attachment distress," where the caregiver's absence is felt not just emotionally but also economically, complicating the child's attachment behavior (Sanchez-Lopez et al., 2019). Moreover, the socio-economic backdrop—working in foreign countries, often with precarious work conditions—may contribute to emotional avoidance or disorganization, as the worker might rely on self-reliance to cope with the pressures of living abroad, which could mirror avoidant or disorganized attachment behaviors (Garrett, 2023; Sutton, 2018). This perspective challenges the traditional attachment models that focus primarily on proximity, suggesting that attachment security may not always be tied to physical closeness but can also be impacted by emotional and psychological support across cultural boundaries.

For OFWs, separation from family members often leads to significant distress and anxiety, reflecting the attachment-related emotional challenges described by Bowlby (Lahousen et al., 2019). The physical distance from loved ones, particularly spouses and children, underscores the impact of attachment disruptions on emotional well-being. Hence, the research aims to explore the emotional and psychological challenges faced by OFWs due to prolonged separation from their families, including issues related to attachment, grief, and loss. Key research questions focus on the impact of separation on OFWs' mental health, their coping mechanisms, and the influence of cultural and familial expectations on their emotional

adjustment. Exploring these experiences is crucial for understanding the unique struggles of OFWs, as their emotional well-being is often overlooked in migration studies.

3. Methodology

This qualitative research employed a multiple case study design to investigate the lived experiences of OFWs in Kanagawa, Japan, focusing on their separation anxiety, loss experiences, and adjustment. This approach was carefully selected to explore the diverse contexts in which OFWs navigate the challenges of working abroad, while also providing a detailed understanding of individual cases within these settings. Creswell's (2013) guidelines for case study research were followed, ensuring a systematic approach to data collection from multiple sources. This allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the varied socio-cultural, economic, and psychological factors influencing participants' experiences. The study also integrated a phenomenological approach, which focuses on understanding the shared lived experiences of individuals. This methodology enabled the research to delve into the commonalities of OFWs' emotional struggles—such as separation anxiety and the impact of distance from family—by examining the essence of their personal and collective experiences. In line with Moustakas (1994), the phenomenological method emphasized the importance of participants' first-person perspectives in capturing the meaning and significance they attribute to their experiences, especially in seeking mental health care or community support.

By combining these two methodologies, the study benefits from both the richness of context-specific insights offered by the case study design and the depth of understanding provided by phenomenology. The case study approach highlights the contextual diversity of OFWs' lives, while the phenomenological method allows for the identification of shared themes and meanings across individual experiences. This dual approach enriches the study by offering a nuanced understanding of the factors that shape OFWs' mental health and adjustment processes. It provides both a broad contextual framework and an in-depth examination of the emotional and psychological aspects of their experiences, facilitating a more comprehensive view of the challenges they face and the coping strategies they employ.

For this study, three OFWs were purposively selected, each living in different cities in Japan and possessing diverse professional backgrounds. All participants have completed their college degrees in the Philippines, are fluent in English, and are currently working professionals. Participant 1 is a 46-year-old mother of five children who works as an English

teacher in Odawara, Kanagawa. She plays a central role in supporting her family both emotionally and financially, despite the challenges of being away from her children. Participant 2 is a 30-year-old female engineer working for Nissan in Yokohama. As the youngest of three siblings, she is the only female in her family. Her experiences as an OFW are shaped by her close relationship with her parents and her responsibility to provide support despite the emotional strain of working abroad. Participant 3 is a male Sales and Marketing Officer in a trading company for ship spare parts in Hadano, Kanagawa. At 35 years old, he is the oldest of three siblings and the sole breadwinner for his family in the Philippines. His role as the family's primary financial provider has influenced his emotional journey as an OFW, particularly in the face of significant personal losses and the challenges of managing work and family responsibilities from a distance. Each participant brings a unique perspective to the study, and their experiences of distress, adaptation, and emotional turmoil as OFWs provide valuable insights into the complex realities of migration and living abroad.

The small sample size, while limited, was sufficient for qualitative research goals, particularly in exploring the depth of participants' lived experiences and obtaining rich, reflective data. Qualitative research often prioritizes depth over breadth, and in-depth insights can be gathered effectively from a smaller number of participants when the focus is on understanding complex, nuanced phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

The study employed a narrative technique, integrating both in-depth interviews and the Filipino indigenous methods of *pagkamustahan* (a casual check-in or asking about someone's well-being) and *pakikipagkwentuhan* (informal storytelling or conversation). These indigenous methods were purposefully selected to align with the cultural values of the Filipino participants, enabling them to share their experiences in a manner that felt authentic and comfortable. *Pagkamustahan* and *pakikipagkwentuhan* facilitate open and candid dialogue, creating a relaxed environment conducive to deep reflection and trust-building between the researcher and participants. These methods help in gathering culturally relevant data by respecting the communal and relational aspects of Filipino communication, which is central to understanding OFWs' emotional and social dynamics.

By blending narrative techniques with these indigenous methods, the study ensured a rich and nuanced data collection process. This approach allowed for the capture of not only the individual stories of participants but also the cultural and emotional undercurrents that influence their experiences of separation anxiety, loss, and adjustment. The narrative

interviews provided the structure for exploring personal stories in-depth, while *pagkamustahan* and *pakikipagkwentuhan* encouraged participants to express their experiences in a more conversational, natural manner, enhancing the authenticity of the data. The integration of these methods contributed to the reliability of the findings by ensuring that the data collected was both culturally relevant and reflective of the participants' true emotions and perspectives.

The guide questions for the multiple case study were formulated based on grounded theory methodology to allow OFWs to share their experiences of separation anxiety, loss, and adjustment. These questions were validated by experts in psychology and written in both English and Filipino to ensure clarity and comfort for participants. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed by a language expert to maintain the integrity of the responses. Thematic analysis, guided by Boyatzis's (1998) inductive approach, was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data. This approach was chosen for its ability to allow themes to emerge organically from participants' narratives, ensuring that the analysis remained rooted in the data and reflective of the lived experiences of the OFWs. To ensure rigor and validity in identifying themes, the analysis followed several key steps. First, initial codes were generated from the data, which were then organized into broader themes through iterative comparison. Throughout this process, multiple researchers reviewed the findings to achieve consensus and enhance the reliability of the identified themes. Additionally, the researcher engaged in member checking, where a subset of participants reviewed the findings to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations, thus enhancing the credibility of the analysis.

Ethical considerations were carefully followed to protect participant welfare. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were made aware of the study's purpose and potential benefits. They were assured of their voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time without penalty, and the confidentiality of their responses. Anonymity was maintained, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. The study was reviewed and approved by the University's Ethics Review Committee, ensuring that ethical standards were met throughout the research process. Additionally, participants were provided with psychological support resources, including access to counseling services, to mitigate potential distress while discussing sensitive topics.

To further safeguard participant well-being, all data and transcripts were securely stored and destroyed after the study's completion. A small token of appreciation was given to the participants as a gesture of gratitude for their involvement. The results of the study were

presented to participants for validation to ensure the accuracy of the findings. These ethical measures align with the study's focus on mental health care and community support, reinforcing the commitment to both participant safety and the integrity of the research process.

4. Findings and Discussion

The participants in this study consisted of OFWs from various sectors, including healthcare, construction, and domestic work, with a demographic profile that varied in age, gender, and duration of employment abroad. They were between 25 to 45 years old, with varying lengths of stay abroad, ranging from one to ten years. Findings were organized into superordinate and subordinate themes: The superordinate theme of emotional turmoil was characterized by subordinate themes of attachment anxiety and grief from separation, highlighting feelings of loneliness, isolation, and the emotional toll of being away from family. Another superordinate theme, adaptation strategies, was divided into subordinate themes of social support illustrating how OFWs rely on both virtual communications with family and personal resilience to cope with their emotional struggles.

A unique finding in the study was the significant emotional impact of virtual communication on OFWs' coping mechanisms, as many participants expressed that while digital platforms helped them stay connected to their families, it often highlighted the emotional distance and deepened feelings of longing and isolation. Another unique finding was the role of guilt in the emotional strain of OFWs, where participants often felt guilty for not being physically present during important family events, such as birthdays or illnesses, which intensified their sense of loss and anxiety. Additionally, a notable discovery was that family expectations played a dual role: while financial support was seen as a source of pride, the pressure to meet these expectations, often combined with limited emotional support, led to heightened stress and emotional fatigue. These findings highlight the complex interplay between emotional distress, technological connections, and familial expectations, offering new insights into the emotional experiences of OFWs that go beyond the typical narrative of economic sacrifice.

The results of the analysis across various cases, forming a more detailed framework for narratives involving separation anxiety, adjustment and experiences of loss among OFWs. Table 1 displays the prevalent themes identified in the analyzed cases.

Table 1

Themes of separation anxiety, adjustment and loss experiences of Overseas Filipino Workers across three cases

Variables	Themes	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Separation Anxiety	Distress	✓	✓	✓
Adjustment	Adaptation	✓	✓	✓
Loss Experiences	Emotional Turmoil	✓	✓	✓

The emotional journeys of the three OFWs in this study reveal interconnected themes of distress, adaptation, and emotional turmoil, central to the OFW experience. Across all participants, distress stemming from separation anxiety, homesickness, and guilt about being away from their families emerged as a consistent theme. However, the ways in which this distress was expressed and managed varied. Participant 1, for example, felt a deep sense of responsibility toward her family, which motivated her to endure the emotional toll of separation. Despite these challenges, she demonstrated resilience by maintaining strong communication with her children and prioritizing familial connections from afar. This helped mitigate feelings of isolation, highlighting the importance of relational bonds in managing distress. Similarly, Participant 2 also faced separation anxiety but her emotional journey was complicated by personal losses, including the death of her grandfather and a breakup. These events led to heightened anxiety and sadness, but her reliance on family support and proactive approach to forming new relationships helped her cope. Her story emphasizes the significance of personal growth and the role of social networks in providing emotional support amidst the chaos of separation and loss. Participant 3, like the others, experienced distress from romantic separation, but his narrative was particularly marked by the emotional toll of his breakup and concern for his parents' well-being. Despite these challenges, he adapted by seeking emotional support from colleagues, illustrating resilience through the establishment of workplace relationships.

Across all three cases, the participant's experiences reveal that while distress and emotional turmoil are central to the OFW experience, resilience often arises through adaptive strategies such as maintaining familial bonds, seeking psychosocial support, and focusing on personal growth. All three participants shared the common thread of distress linked to separation, but their coping mechanisms differed based on personal circumstances, relationships, and strategies for managing their emotions. Participant 1's focus on family communication, Participant 2's reliance on family support and new relationships, and

Participant 3's focus on workplace connections each underscore the diverse yet interconnected ways OFWs navigate emotional challenges.

These findings are consistent with theoretical frameworks on distress and adaptation. For instance, the role of social support in mitigating emotional distress aligns with Thoits' (2011) research on the importance of social networks. Furthermore, the participants' resilience through adaptation mirrors Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) Stress and Coping Theory, which highlights that individuals use different coping strategies to manage stressors, particularly in challenging situations like migration. Emotional turmoil due to personal losses, such as breakups or the death of loved ones, also aligns with research on grief and loss among migrant populations (Schwartz et al., 2018), underscoring the need for tailored mental health support for OFWs.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive exploration of the emotional experiences of OFWs, focusing on the themes of distress, adaptation, and emotional turmoil. The findings highlight the shared distress stemming from separation anxiety, homesickness, and guilt across all participants. However, the ways in which these emotions were expressed and managed varied. Participant 1, for instance, showed resilience by maintaining strong communication with her children, while Participant 2 relied on familial support and sought new relationships to cope with her personal losses. Participant 3, facing emotional turmoil from a breakup and concern for his parents, demonstrated adaptability through workplace support networks.

These individual experiences underscore the complex emotional landscape that OFWs navigate. The findings align with theories of acculturation stress and resilience, illustrating how social support, personal growth, and adaptive strategies help mitigate distress and emotional upheaval. The variation in coping mechanisms suggests that personalized interventions are essential to address the unique emotional needs of OFWs.

To support the emotional well-being of OFWs in Japan, a comprehensive program focused on psychosocial support, family communication, cultural orientation, and mental health services is essential. Family communication initiatives can help bridge the distance between OFWs and their families, offering affordable communication channels and family-centered events that reinforce familial bonds. Additionally, cultural orientation programs prior to departure and ongoing workplace integration support will prepare OFWs to adapt to their

new environments and work dynamics, fostering smoother transitions and stronger professional relationships. Peer support networks and community-building activities, such as cultural immersion excursions, language exchange programs, and cross-cultural training workshops will aid in adapting to the Japanese culture, fostering both personal and professional growth. By implementing these initiatives, OFWs can improve their emotional well-being, successfully navigate cultural and work-related challenges, and mental health support systems can be better aligned with the specific needs of OFWs, promoting their well-being and successful adaptation to life abroad.

This study provides a strong justification for developing a tailored mental health program for OFWs by highlighting the unique emotional and psychological challenges they face due to prolonged separation from their families. The findings underscore that OFWs experience attachment-related anxiety, grief, and emotional isolation, which often go unaddressed in traditional mental health support systems. By drawing on the Attachment Theory framework, the study demonstrates the need for interventions that focus on strengthening emotional connections and addressing the specific attachment-related issues of separation and loss. A mental health program designed based on these insights could offer OFWs the tools to manage feelings of isolation, guilt, and stress, while also providing culturally sensitive support that acknowledges the pressures of family expectations and the challenges of adapting to a foreign environment. Moreover, such a program could incorporate coping strategies, virtual communication tools, and support networks to help OFWs maintain emotional resilience while working abroad. This targeted approach would ultimately improve OFWs' mental well-being, enabling them to better navigate the emotional toll of migration.

The study affirms that prolonged separation from family is a significant emotional burden for OFWs, resulting in attachment-related anxiety, grief, and emotional distress. This finding is supported by extant literature, which highlights the psychological toll of migration on OFWs, emphasizing their struggles with isolation, loneliness, and the guilt of not being physically present during key family events (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020; Zarsuelo, 2018). The theoretical framework of Attachment Theory provides a robust explanation for these experiences, suggesting that the disruption of secure attachments to loved ones triggers emotional distress and anxiety, as attachment bonds are central to emotional regulation and mental health. Furthermore, the study reveals that while digital communication helps maintain some connection, it often amplifies feelings of emotional distance, underscoring the need for

culturally sensitive interventions that address the complex emotional dynamics of OFWs' experiences.

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This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines set by Lyceum of the Philippines University - Batangas. The conduct of this study has been approved and given relative clearance(s) by Lyceum of the Philippines University - Batangas.

Declaration

The author declares the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in writing this paper. In particular, the author used Quillbot in paraphrasing ideas. The author takes full responsibility in ensuring proper review and editing of contents generated using AI.

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