

Experiencing Meaning in Life as Thirty-Something Single Filipinas through Caring for Self and for Others

Samantha Erika N. Mendez

*University of the Philippines-Diliman
snmendez@up.edu.ph*

Michelle G. Ong

*University of the Philippines-Diliman
mgong@up.edu.ph*

ABSTRACT

The Philippines is a collectivist and marriage-promoting culture that also values one's shared identity with others. We wanted to find out how single women in their thirties experienced meaning in life in this context using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the research approach. We collected data from six always single Filipino women aged 32 to 38 through multiple face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. We extracted five emergent themes: advocating for the self, caring for others, finding opportunities in singlehood, making sense of life's challenges, and incorporating spirituality. This paper discusses the first three themes as they cohered around the

potential for experiencing meaning in life in valuing both the self and others, and in reframing singlehood as a source of opportunities to care for both the self and others.

Keywords: single women, self, others, meaning in life, interpretative phenomenological analysis

Meaning in life is thought to be the sum of all experiences a person has that fill up that person's life, allowing them to feel that their lives have a purpose, are valuable, and make sense (Martela & Steger, 2016; Heintzelman & King, 2014). In psychology, meaning in life is studied as the "nature of one's experience of a meaningful life" and the "conditions under which this meaningfulness is experienced" (Battista & Almond, 1973, p. 409). This is believed to change across the lifespan (Grouden & Jose, 2015) contingent on the different developmental tasks people are currently working on (Ebersole, 1998), as different life events provide different opportunities for meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006). It is important to study this as experiencing one's life as meaningful is positively associated with well-being outcomes (Steger, 2018) and negatively associated with adverse outcomes like symptoms of depression (Routledge & FioRito, 2021). Experiencing meaning in life may help people cope with the developmental crises they have to deal with at different points in their lives (Recker, Peacock & Wong, 1987).

The personal meanings that people have are, however, not singular entities that reside in each person, but rather, are an amalgamation of all meaning present that is influenced by one's personal background and socio-cultural situation (Wong, 1998). It is said to be linked with how people see themselves (Baumeister, 1991), and even this self-concept is influenced by culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Culture provides a framework for interpreting one's life (Steger, Kawabata, Shimai & Otake, 2008) with ideologies and norms that influence how people behave and make sense of their experiences (MacKenzie & Baumeister, 2014). Thus, understanding what makes life meaningful may entail taking into consideration the socio-cultural context that one is in at specific points in their developmental timelines.

This paper explores how meaning in life is experienced by Filipino women in their thirties who have never married in a socio-cultural context that promotes the ideology of marriage and family and in a developmental context where these milestones are expected to be achieved.

The Socio-cultural Context

Philippine Society

The Philippines has a collectivistic, family-centric, and pronatalist culture (Abalos, 2021) that promotes marriage as the context for starting families (Williams & Guest, 2005). This is likely because most of the country's population is Catholic (PSA, 2015) and the norms are driven by the culture's value system. The typical Filipino family is characterized as large, family-centered, child-centered, and close-knit (Morillo, Capuno & Mendoza, 2013). Like many countries worldwide, the traditional social expectation for young adults to marry and start having their own families is considered the marker of maturity and successful passage into adulthood (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). This expectation is believed to be more pronounced among women who are expected to conform to conventional feminine gender norms of exercising care and dependence (Budgeon, 2016). Especially for Filipino women, their attachment to men through marriage is assumed to solidify their identities and complete their womanhood (Eviota, 1994).

Kapwa Theory

Kapwa is a core Filipino value proposed by Enriquez (2007) that serves as one of the defining features of Filipino culture. It is believed to be the source of different values that guide Filipinos' thoughts, behaviors, and interpretations of behaviors and events. *Kapwa* recognizes the shared and reciprocal identity of the self (*ako*) and of others (*iba sa akin*), and extends this sense of unity and equality with those considered as *hindi ibang-tao* (one of us) and with those considered as *ibang-tao* (not one of us) (Enriquez, 2007). Recent clarification of the *kapwa* theory shows that in social relationships, people tend to identify someone as either *ibang-tao* or *hindi ibang-tao*, and they are likely to engage in behaviors that promote *pakikipagkapwa* (being with one another) with those whom they consider as *hindi ibang-tao* (Yacat & Clemente, 2009 as cited in Rungduin, Rungduin, & Acopio, 2020). Relatedly, the sense of *kapwa* towards one's in-group could also extend to the outgroup, but to a lesser extent (Conaco & Ortega, 2011). In relation to meaning in life, it is likely that Filipinos may derive meaning not only through and within themselves as individuals but also from this sense of affinity they share with other people.

The Developmental Context

One of the key developmental tasks in young adulthood is finding a partner (Erikson, 1963). In most societies, failing to accomplish certain developmental tasks within one's social clock or timeline deemed by society as appropriate, could result in negative social responses like ostracism (Neugarten, 1976).

The Rise of Singlehood

Recently, however, a worldwide increase in singlehood has been observed (DePaulo, 2019), including in Asia and the Philippines (Esteve, Kashtap, Roman, Cheng, Fukuda, Nie & Lee, 2020; Tan, 2010). In Europe, there is an increase in singlehood after leaving home for young adult women but not for men (van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). If this trend in delayed and decreased marriage continues, the universality of marriage is projected to cease in the coming decades (Esteve et al., 2020). Socio-cultural attributions of this decline point to the distortion of the sex ratio at birth, particularly in cultures that have a strong preference for male children and have a high incidence of sex-selective abortions, low fertility levels, and the expansion in education, career opportunities, and earning capacity, particularly for women (Celik, 2018; Esteve et al., 2020; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). Declining marriage rates can also be explained by the rise in divorce rates and the increasing acceptance of alternative arrangements like cohabitation (DePaulo, 2019). On a more personal level, some people attribute their singlehood to a low capacity for courtship, fearing being hurt, having high mate standards, and having more freedom (Apostolou, O, & Esposito, 2020).

A similar trend is also observed in the Philippines. Within a decade from 2005 to 2015, marriage rates have fallen by 20% (PSA, 2015), and both men and women married for the first time at a later age in 2019 than in 2000 (PSA, 2003, 2020). These statistics are likely due to a marriage squeeze experienced by high achieving Filipino women and low achieving Filipino men, as it remains a cultural expectation for Filipino women to marry upwards in terms of socio-economic status (Williams & Arguillas, 2012). It is also possible for well-educated women to have higher opportunity costs when they enter marriage and start families (Morillo et al., 2013). The lack of a

divorce law and the high cost of annulment in the Philippines make it difficult to leave problematic unions, thus possibly lowering the desirability of marriage (Williams & Guest, 2005; Abalos, 2021).

The Consequences of Being Single

Despite these changes in the marriage landscape in the world and in the Philippines, the expectation to marry persists. Filipino women and men still valued and considered marrying and having a family desirable (Williams & Guest, 2005). A possible explanation for this is a cultural lag where the cultural ideal and expectations for marriage and family have not yet caught up with current society's actual experience of delayed and declining marriage, and developments that enable single people to live meaningful lives (Byrne & Carr, 2005). This glorified status ascribed to heterosexual marriage is posited by DePaulo and Morris (2005) to be the primary driver of singlism, or the anti-single sentiments in society, including stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination made based on one's perceived or actual relationship status. For example, compared to married people, society tends to perceive single people more negatively in terms of loneliness, warmth, care, fun, and adventurousness, (Hertel, DePaulo, Morris & Stucke, 2007), adjustment, social maturity, self-centeredness, envy (Morris, DePaulo, Hertel & Taylor, 2008), life satisfaction, physical attractiveness, self-esteem, sociability, and traits like agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism (Greitmeyer, 2009).

This negative stereotyping is also evident in societal discourses and representations depicting single women as the pathologized "crazy cat lady" (Lahad & Hazan, 2014) or the unmarried movie character who dies a lonely death. These social representations imply that singles do not only lack spouses and children but also all kinds of social relationships (Yodovich & Lahad, 2017). This negative view of single people tends to get worse as one gets older (Hertel et al, 2007), particularly for women, as this indicates their failure to maximize their freedom and to "unsingle" during the prime years of their normative singlehood (Lahad, 2013; Lahad & Hazan, 2014, p.127).

Additionally, single women may also be subjected to other social and economic disadvantages. Despite enjoying the perks of singlehood like

freedom and independence, some single women also report the burden of doing tasks on their own and the loneliness due to “not being the most important person to anybody” (Macvarish, 2006, p.3). Among young adults, the unattached participants scored higher on romantic loneliness and family loneliness compared to their peers who were in romantic relationships (Adamczyk, 2016). Single people are also observed to have a high likelihood of finding themselves in poverty in old age (Moghadam, 2005). Particularly among women, the retirement poverty rate is highest for the never-married compared to the divorced, widowed, and married women (Ghilarducci, Jaimes & Webb, 2018). In the Philippines, the elderly tend to rely on their children to care for them and keep them company in old age (Alampay, 2014), as a way of paying back their debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) to their parents who raised them (Domingo, 1994). With neither spouses, children nor the social status ascribed to being a wife or mother, single Filipinas may find themselves socially, economically and psychologically disadvantaged.

Given this context, to be never married in a pro-marriage society like the Philippines could position single women vulnerable to negative stereotyping and mistreatment, loneliness, and poverty with neither spouse nor children to support them. In our bigger project, we aimed to explore how meaning in life is experienced by single Filipino women in their thirties within this socio-cultural context. This current paper specifically discusses a subset of the results to elucidate the relevance of advocating for the self and caring for others using the unique opportunities and privileges single women have in their efforts at creating meaningful lives in a collectivist culture that values marriage. Most of the existing work on meaning in life, particularly in the Philippines, has often been made from a quantitative approach, which may fail to capture the nuanced facets of this human experience. This qualitative inquiry potentially contributes to a better understanding of the Asian and Filipino experience of meaning in life, specifically in shedding light on how culture can be utilized as a means of helping single women

create meaningful lives, despite living what may be perceived as non-normative lives.

Methodology

Research Design

We used the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) as a qualitative framework to explore and understand the women's lived experiences of meaning in life. IPA's focus on phenomenology allowed us to capture each participant's unique perspective and lived experience of meaningfulness in their lives as single women while its hermeneutic feature enabled us to interpret and understand how they made sense of their experiences. These features of the methodology enabled us to acknowledge the participants' expertise in their own life experiences and the researchers' critical role as co-constructors of knowledge in this scholarly pursuit. These are reflected throughout this paper using the participants' own words in grounding the researchers' interpretations of the participants' sense-making. The idiographic feature of IPA also enabled us to see each participant's narrative and worldview as unique but embedded within a bigger socio-cultural context.

Participants

The participants were six heterosexual Filipino women aged 32 to 38 who had never married, were unattached during the period of data collection, did not have children, had been living in Metro Manila for at least two years, and were willing to participate in the study. They were recruited through opportunity sampling and referrals. To ensure some range and diversity in experiences in our homogenous sample, we selected two participants each who were in their early, middle and late thirties. There was also an equal number of participants engaged in professional and non-professional work. Among those engaged in professional employment are Isis, a 32-year-old licensed teacher, Athena, a 36-year-old licensed mental health care professional, and Hana a 37-year-old licensed engineer. Among those engaged in non-professional work are Diana, a 32-year-old security

guard, Tala, a 35-old-nanny, and Maya, a 38-year-old house helper. Code names were also used to protect their identities. All of them also said they did not actively choose and expect to still be single in their thirties. While they all said that they had accepted their current single status at the time of the interviews, five of the six were still open to the possibility of being partnered in the future.

Data Collection

To collect data, the first author conducted two face-to-face interviews with each participant, done at least a week apart. She used a semi-structured interview guide composed of neutral, open-ended questions that inquired about the participants' daily lives, their experiences of singlehood and meaning in life, including their thoughts and feelings about these experiences, as well as other people's comments about their lives. Ethics clearance from the Ateneo de Manila University Research Ethics Office and informed consent from each participant were obtained before data collection began.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analytic procedure used in this study was informed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2022). Prior to data collection, an immersion into the existing literature on meaning in life and singlehood was done. The first author kept a reflexivity journal describing her own experience of meaning in life and singlehood to bracket her views and experiences. After collecting data, transcribing, and reading the first participant's interview transcript thrice to gain familiarity with the text, notes were written on the margins of the transcript document. Experiential statements (ES) rooted on the participants' experiences and meaning-making were created based on these notes. ESs were then grouped together based on meaningful connections that highlighted each participant's unique story. Personal experiential themes (PET) and subthemes were then abstracted based on these clustered experiential statements. These PETs were organized into a table and a narrative account of the first participant's personal experience of meaning in life was written up, beginning with a description of each PET, followed by the ESs that depicted the specific ways the participant experienced these. To demonstrate, one of the PETs from Athena's narrative is 'contributing to the

growth and learning of others,' and one of the ESs under that theme is 'not contributing meant a loss of purpose.' Direct quotes that best reflected what each theme meant were lifted from the interview transcripts to ground our interpretation of the participant's subjective experience. We went through the same process for the succeeding five cases, treating each of them as unique and separate. After all the six narrative accounts had been written up and validated by the participants, we created a master list of all themes and proceeded to look for similarities and differences across the six cases. Based on this master list of themes, we drew a final list of group experiential themes (GET) and subthemes to reflect the participants' shared experiences of meaning in life as single Filipino women in their thirties. In this paper, we presented three of the five GETs, namely, advocating for the self, caring for others, and finding opportunities in singlehood. Finally, we used our literature review to discuss, interpret, and make sense of how these women made sense of their experiences.

To maintain the quality of our qualitative research (Yardley, 2000), we asked each participant, either in person or via email, to validate our written narrative of their accounts to ensure that we understood and told their stories accurately upon the completion of each participant's write-up. Detailed descriptions of the research procedures were also provided for transparency and to facilitate the conduct of research audits by the second author. Direct quotes were also used to enable readers to trace the direct source of the themes.

Reflexivity

Because IPA acknowledges the researcher's role in the co-construction of knowledge throughout the research process (Smith, et al., 2009), a reflexive practice is an indispensable part of this research design. The first author, who was fully involved throughout the research process from conceptualization to manuscript writing, was single and in her early thirties while working on this project. She had been a recipient of inquiries about her life pursuits and unsolicited advice on her dating and marriage prospects, which was one of the things that got her interested in pursuing this line of study. The participants were also aware of the first author's age and civil status. The reflexive practice allowed the first author to set aside her own experiences and beliefs to focus on the participants' experiences, be

open to differences in their shared experiences, and be mindful of the limited nature of her understanding of what may seem to be similarities in their experiences.

Results

Five group experiential themes emerged from the analysis of the entire data set from the six participants. These are 1) advocating for the self, 2) caring for others, 3) finding opportunities in singlehood, 4) making sense of life's challenges, and 5) incorporating spirituality. The first three themes are presented together in this paper as they cohere around the potential for experiencing meaning in life as single Filipino women in valuing both the self and others, reflective of the "shared sense of self" in the Filipino core value *kapwa*, and in seeing singlehood as providing opportunities for them to engage in these meaningful pursuits. The last two themes on sense-making and spirituality are discussed in Mendez (2022) while a more detailed discussion of the entire dataset is part of the first author's Ph.D. dissertation.

Advocating for the Self

One of the ways that the women experienced meaning in their lives was through advocating for themselves. They did so by asserting themselves, and by clarifying and choosing what mattered to them and aligned with who they believed themselves to be. They also took care of themselves either through leisure and self-development pursuits or through self-sufficiency and financial stability pursuits.

Pursuing What is Authentic to the Self

Being single in their thirties, the women shared the experience of struggling with pressures within their important social relationships in relation to their life choices. The participants struggled between doing what they want and what others, particularly their families, want and believe is good for them. Athena experienced being pressured by her own mother to follow in her footsteps in meeting the social expectation of becoming a wife and mother at her age instead of pursuing graduate studies. This led her to feel like she was not permitted to show her own values and interests, and live as herself.

“So 2018 was the year I decided to leave home. Cause I felt that my own person was being stifled. I was held back. Cause I felt, why, there is nothing wrong with being who I am. I felt like I was pursuing the values and things that I feel are important, and which are also given importance by other people. And there is nothing wrong with that. I just felt that our differences [in values] was not respected by my mom.” (Athena)

Clarifying what was important to her and refusing to compromise just to fit in seemed to enable Athena to live more authentically in ways that aligned with her interests and values.

“I recognize that there is a mold, I mean, it exists. And I am being pressured to fit it, right? But I also know that we can’t all fit the mold. And if we all tried to fit the mold, I feel like I will compromise something in myself in a sense that that is not my need yet, so why should I insist for that to be my need, right?” (Athena)

Relatedly, Isis shared how she had always honored her parents through her obedience until she was caught in a situation where they strongly disapproved of her boyfriend. Their inability to accept and support the partner she wanted and chose led her to feel hurt and frustrated. She dealt with this by setting firm but healthy boundaries in terms of how much influence she gave her parents over her personal life decisions. Since that incident, she reported being more assertive and selective in terms of what decisions she allowed her parents to make for her.

There were times before that I felt choked. I mean, I have to do this, I have to do that. But now, I am able to choose, like I am able to filter what they [parents] can and cannot dictate. Yes, yeah, I can express myself now. (Isis)

Hana also struggled between fulfilling her mother’s dream of her becoming a successful engineer working abroad and her personal desire of living a simple life in the province. She shared about an opportunity to live out her mother’s dream for her and her reluctance in accepting it. Though she claimed to still be at a crossroads regarding her career, her narrative

showed that in her decision-making process, she considered herself, and gave ample weight to what she wanted and their alignment with her values and faith.

What's more important for me is that I have a good relationship with my boss and I am paid enough. I don't need to be paid so much... I want to get married, live in the province, take care of my husband and children and work for the government or have my own small business—that simple. Because you will be missing a lot of things if you focus too much in your career. I feel like, I think, we weren't created by the Lord to just earn money and focus on our careers. There are lots of things to enjoy in life like friends, relationships, and faith. (Hana)

Hana also struggled internally with remaining authentic when caught between two contradicting values, beliefs or desires. She shared having struggled between being with the man she wanted and obeying the dictates of her religion, which positioned the man she wanted as an unacceptable choice of partner because he was not of the same religion. She addressed this internal conflict between two valued aspects of her life by choosing one as more important than the other. Her faith trumped her personal desire. This prioritization of her faith enabled her to define and guide her decisions, and partly, her identity as a child of God.

I really wanted him but I also know that the Lord does not want him for me because [the Bible said] 'do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.' At that time, it was really very difficult for me but my struggle ended when I decided and said, 'Lord, I don't want to disobey you. I don't want to just have these earthly desires which are not pleasing for you.' Looking back, I am grateful to the Lord because, through His grace, he did not allow me to fall. (Hana)

These women's struggles were reflected in the emotional and even visceral descriptions of choking, being in pain, stifled, held back, and not permitted to be themselves. They experienced the pull to conform to external expectations and the push to remain authentic and authentic to themselves.

Even within themselves, they also struggled when faced with opposing beliefs and desires. Moreover, their social roles, especially as daughters, girlfriends, and faithful believers, were also brought to light, and the underlying social expectations from these roles were made explicit, real, and relevant in their unique relationships with the people who mattered to them. They experienced meaning in making choices and doing things that served as expressions and assertions of whom they believed themselves to be and the values and beliefs they held dear at that moment.

Caring for the Self

Taking care of themselves was another way that the participants advocated for themselves. Interestingly, when asked what and how they spent their time, energy and resources on, we observed that the women's preferred mode of caring for themselves seemed to vary depending on their socio-economic status.

Leisure and self-development. For participants engaged in professional work, self-care was done through pursuits that facilitated growth and self-development like doing their hobbies, traveling, learning new skills, and finding challenges in their careers. Traveling was like food for Isis's soul that allowed her to relax, experience awe, and live vicariously through the strangers she met.

I get to meet people, I get to talk to them which you can't do here in the Metro... It's like, because sometimes I just talk to them, like the boatmen, or I will approach the kids picking up shells and ask them what they're doing... yeah it's fun, and I ask them how they are... I don't get self-conscious and it's also a new perspective. Cause it's also like you get a new perspective from them. I get to experience; I get to absorb their experience. (Isis)

Some also spent their resources on relaxing leisure activities that helped them cope with stress. After a stressful work week, Athena's "ultimate self-care" involved watching movies, getting massages, and hanging out with friends. Hana spent her resources on traveling, eating out, and engaging in hobbies that help her unwind.

I actually started traveling after I had my first fight with my boss... From then on, I thought, traveling gives me comfort and eases my stress. (Hana)

Isis turned to crafting and self-improvement pursuits like learning a new language and contemplating and seeking further growth in her career.

I want somewhere that I can grow but you know, the current set-up actually works. There's work-life balance... but I still feel there's something lacking. I feel I'm still looking for something so I think, do I let this (her job) go or do I risk it? I don't know. (Isis)

Financial security and self-sufficiency. For the participants engaged in non-professional work, financial security was the salient concern. All three shared being their family of origin's breadwinners and saving up for their own business ventures in the future. Diana wanted to have her own tailoring shop while Maya and Tala wanted to put up a restaurant and a food cart in their hometowns. Maya narrated how she learned the hard way the importance of establishing her own financial stability so she could help others. Since then, she has been setting aside a portion of her salary for her own savings.

Now I've realized how it's actually difficult to give everything [to my family] and leave none for myself. Because when they ask for more, I'll have nothing left to give and then I'll have to look for more [money]. I find watching YouTube videos helpful, like when the financial coach said to set aside 10% of my income for myself and not send everything [to my family]. I now follow that advice. (Maya)

Some of them have also been constantly warned by their siblings and friends that they may grow old alone with no children to care for them if they remained single. Cognizant of this possibility, Tala took active steps to set up her own financial safety nets. The anticipation of possibly living her later life on her own fortified her desire to work harder to save up for her retirement plan, which is to open a food cart in her hometown.

I am making regular contributions to SSS (Social Security System), to PhilHealth (the country's universal healthcare), and to St. Peter's (memorial plan). I've set those things in place so that nobody will be inconvenienced in case something happens to me. (Tala)

Relatedly, Diana also shared her preparations for the future, but unlike Tala who prepared for possible singlehood later in her life, Diana envisions having her own family and is working towards saving up for her own business that will support her future family.

Maybe after 10 years I want to have my own house... I'm also thinking if by that time, the guy for me comes, I'm also thinking about having my own family. A family that I can call my own. And then to have a business, that will be the main source of support for my own family. (Diana)

Regardless of the manner, taking care of themselves contributed to the experience of meaning in life for these women in the context of singlehood. These self-care behaviors may have been done to address some practical costs of being single like growing old alone or finding a quality partner, and to improve their chances of achieving all kinds of security—emotional, psychological, financial—without the aid of a life partner.

Caring for Others

Another salient shared experience among the participants was how they seemed to value and care for the people around them. When the conversation turned to how and where they spent their resources, they were also quick to mention pursuits that benefitted not just themselves but also other people like their families of origin, people at work, and their communities.

For many of them, their special others were their families of origin. Isis shared trying her best to show up for her family because she knows she can rely on them to be there for her too, especially if she grows old alone.

Of course, my family is important. Yeah, because they are also the ones who will be there for me too. And there was a time when

I would, yeah, I always make it a point to [visit them], even if they live far and it is a bit inconvenient for me, but I always put them first. (Isis)

Diana, Maya and Tala, who are their family's breadwinners, expressed their care towards them through financial means. Maya shared that she was the eldest sibling and Diana believed she was the only one with the means to support her family. These seemed to contribute to a strong sense of duty in both women to financially provide for their families of origin.

My family is important to me because nobody else will help them but me... and if I don't, if they are not my inspiration, I don't think I will be working this hard. (Diana)
I'm the eldest of 10. So there, I'm just really focused on my family. (Maya)

In addition to financial support, Tala also expressed her wish to give physical care to her parents someday when she moves back to her hometown.

I really fall short in giving physical comfort. Even though I give them money, for me, it's really not enough. So whenever I visit them, I will do things with them, no cellphones. What I really lack is giving physical care to my parents. (Tala)

For Athena and Tala, the recipients of their care were the people whom they work for. Athena's job as an academic allowed her to give back and contribute to the learning of her students and the growth of her scientific field.

Cause I feel like when I learn something, it cannot stop with me, that it has to come out. And that other people should benefit from what I know. (Athena)

Tala expressed her care towards the children she is taking care of in her work as a nanny. She cared for them as if they were her own and derived joy from this.

I take care of them as if they are my own children. It's like I derive, um, like even if I end up becoming an old maid and I will not have children of my own, I have poured all my love and care for them... They are really my happiness. When they do well in school, because they are also very smart, when I see them receiving their certificates [of merit], I feel like I am also a part of that achievement. (Tala)

Diana also believed that she was not just meant to help her family but also give back to her community. At one point in her life, she joined a convent because she wanted to help the poor but eventually had to give up that vocation so she could have gainful employment to financially support her family.

Because for me, um, one of the things for me is to be able to share whatever it is that I have. That the purpose of my income would be to somehow share and give back to the convent that sent me to school before. To sponsor even one (person) so I can give back the kindness I received from them. (Diana)

Caring for the different people in the women's lives appeared to be relevant in their experience of meaningfulness in life. These also seemed to contribute to their holistic development and well-being by being sources of motivation, purpose, satisfaction, and social support. Their efforts in carving their own paths do not seem to be independent of a sense of responsibility for others, especially their families. This could be reflective of how the self is thought of as not entirely separate from the others such that one's happiness and peace of mind cannot be had without securing these for important others.

Finding Opportunities in Singlehood

Another shared experience for the women was how their singlehood provided them with more resources like time, money and energy, and the privilege of choosing how to spend these. In their singlehood, they found opportunities to care for themselves and other people.

For Tala, Diana and Maya, being single meant they have the freedom to choose how to spend their money, specifically for their personal savings or investment and for sharing with their families.

If I'm single, I'm able to stick to my wants, my plans to put up a business compared to if I get married and have children, even if I want to have a business, I may prioritize my children's needs instead. (Tala)

They also expressed worry about their ability to continue financially supporting their families of origin should they marry.

I also think that if I get married, I might not be able to help them anymore. Will my husband still allow me to give monthly contributions? I have these thoughts. (Tala)

Let's say I do find someone, we can't also guarantee that they will be rich, poor or average. If he's also just average, I won't be able to help them (family of origin) anymore... a lot of people I know who are married stopped giving to their families. (Maya)

Athena spoke about having the space and energy to engage in other worthwhile pursuits besides cultivating a romantic relationship.

You have more energy in other areas that you think are important right now or what you think matters... Like with work, with being involved in current issues like in the government. (Athena)

She also believed being single allowed her to focus on her own growth which she hopes would also contribute to other people's growth.

It allows you to focus on yourself, growing as a person. Because there will be returns to that growth. Like for example, with greater self-acceptance or whatever, it changes how you relate with people, um, it changes your worldview and you bring that in your interactions with others. And hopefully, others will also have a sense that they have the space to also grow. (Athena)

Relatedly, while still single, Isis shared wanting to invest in herself to be better and to be whole so she could also attract a partner of the same quality.

I just want to improve myself so that when he comes, when he comes along, I'm okay. And if he leaves or what, I'm whole. I'm okay... Actually, I am already whole. Which is a good thing, like yeah, I'm whole but you know, I'm still putting some more building blocks here and there... So that when, you know, he comes, if he does come, then it's okay. I can show off what I've built. (Isis)

These narratives demonstrated how the single women in the sample experienced meaning in life by engaging in pursuits that enriched not only themselves but also the important others around them using the unique opportunities, resources and privileges that came with their being single young adult women.

Discussion

The results show how caring for the self and caring for others using the opportunities and privileges that singlehood offered women are pivotal to the single women's experience of meaningfulness in life.

Advocating for the Self

In the Philippines where wifehood is considered the "highest feminine achievement" believed to solidify women's identities (Eviota, 1994; p.8), singlehood, especially if by choice, may be perceived as a threat to long-held gender ideologies in Filipino culture, and a threat to the social order that is maintained by marriage and family life (Lahad & Hazan, 2014). This may result in social pressures to conform to such norms as reflected in Athena's feelings of being stifled and held back as she engaged in academic pursuits that were relevant and important to her but did not fit into the societal mold of people her age. This kind of context positions single women as lacking in "order, coherence and meaning" in their life paths (Lahad & Hazan, 2014, p. 135), making it necessary for them to assert and support themselves in

their struggle to remain authentic amidst social pressures and cultural expectations. This was evident in Hana's dilemma to pursue her idea of success, which is living a simple life in the province, which contrasts with her mother's idea of success which involves working abroad. In the case of Isis, she struggled to defend her choice of partner amidst the choices her parents expected her to make.

This finding coincides with past literature where personal pursuits that demonstrate important aspects of the self and that serve as an extension of one's true self may contribute to feelings of meaningfulness in life (McGregor & Little, 1998; Schlegel, Hicks, Arndt, & King, 2009). In their pursuit of an authentic self, personal factors can be seen to interact with the cultural factors in influencing the women's experience of meaning in life in how they navigated and situated themselves as individuals against the backdrop of their families and Filipino society. How they responded to the pressures and conflicts were not just reflections of their career and lifestyle preferences but were expressions of their dearly held values, principles, beliefs, and commitments. For them, the appreciation of these choices as meaningful expressions of oneself is especially significant in the context of conflict or criticism from others who view such choices as being counter to what is believed to be for their own good.

Moreover, it made sense for financial and caregiving concerns to be salient in low-middle-income countries like the Philippines where social security for the elderly has yet to be prioritized (Abejo, 2004). These security issues became apparent in both other people's worries and the women's own concerns about their future. This kind of socio-economic context could be one possible explanation for establishing their own financial safety nets either through personal savings, investments, and future income-generating pursuits, which were particularly pronounced goals for the participants who held non-professional work. Caring for themselves at present through self-development and self-sufficiency pursuits can be a form of preparation for their present and anticipated future needs. Their responses coincided with other single women's reported goals of financial independence, self-actualization, and fulfillment (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003), and finding meaning from fostering personal development in different areas of their lives

(Jackson, 2018). Doing these may have been seen by the participants as providing them with avenues to pursue meaning and a means of coping with the perceived disadvantages of singlehood.

Caring for Others

Pursuing goals that benefitted other people was another way the women experienced meaning in their lives. Most of the respondents, served their families of origin in different ways, while for Athena and Tala, they extended themselves to their communities, particularly, with the people they work with. Challenging the typical notion of single people as lonely, this finding lends support to prior claims that single people are likely to nurture their relationships with families, siblings, friends, and communities by keeping in touch, and giving and receiving support (DePaulo, 2019; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2015). This finding is also consistent with the observation that Southeast Asian singles' everyday lives revolved around their careers and families, particularly Filipinos who served as their family of origin's go-to person for help (Tan, 2010). This was particularly striking in the experiences of Diana, Maya, and Tala who served as their family's breadwinners. This phenomenon could be explained by the sense of filial obligation of adult children to meet the implicit parental expectation to maintain and improve the family of origin's situation (Novero, Blust & Scheidt, 1988). This could also be understood in terms of the Filipino concept of the *tagasalo* (the one who takes care or comes to the rescue) syndrome where one family member, usually the eldest female child, rises to the role of being the family's rescuer (Arellano-Carandang, 1987), as reflected in Maya's sense of duty for her family of origin as the eldest of 10 siblings. Moreover, in the Philippines, caring for the elderly is typically also expected from female family members (Domingo, 1994), which could account for Tala's feeling that she is falling short in terms of giving physical care and support to her aging parents.

Experiencing meaning in life through caring for others is consistent with previous claims that belonging to social relationships, being with people (King, 2004), and having social support and closeness with others contribute to a sense of meaning in life (Lambert, Stillman, Hicks, Kamble, Baumeister & Finchman, 2013). Caring for others within and beyond their families could have also likely provided the participants with a sense of purpose and a

sense that their lives are valuable not just to themselves, but also to other people (George & Park, 2014). This lends support to the claim that meaning in life entails having a sense that life has a purpose (Heintzelman & King, 2014) and value or existential mattering (Costin & Vignoles, 2020).

Caring for others can also be understood from the lens of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology) in terms of the Filipino value of *kapwa*. This concept of having a shared sense of self with others perhaps allowed the women to consider their families, the people they work for, and their communities as *hindi ibang-tao* (one of us) and extensions of themselves (Enriquez, 2007). Thus, with *kapwa* as a lens, the act of taking care of others can be interpreted as being fundamental to taking care of themselves. This is apparent in how the participants included their families in their personal plans. It was almost as if their future well-being could not be conceived as separate from their family's well-being.

Opportunities for Single Women

Being single in a marriage-pushing society is a context that was initially thought disadvantageous for them but was interestingly experienced by our respondents as an avenue for finding opportunities and resources to pursue meaning. The privileges and freedom that came with being single enabled Tala, Diana and Maya to continue fulfilling their duties to their families of origin as breadwinners. Being single gave Athena energy to engage in other pursuits outside of developing a romantic relationship, lent Hana space to strengthen her faith and identity as a child of God, and provided Isis with resources to improve herself. Instead of being limited by their failure to assume the esteemed social roles of wife and mother expected of their developmental stage, the respondents seemed to value and draw meaning and positive self-concepts from other significant social roles that they were already playing such as being daughters, faithful believers, and carers of others in their different fields of work, allowing them to extend their care not just to themselves but also to their *kapwa*. The findings provide support for the potential for meaning in life to be had in reframing singlehood as providing opportunities to protect and nurture both the self and one's relations with others.

These narratives demonstrated the respondents' capacity to create positive identities as single women despite the privileging of couple relationships (Budgeon, 2008). These findings may also be indicative of a changing Filipino society where traditions are not as significant as before. There may be growing acceptance for putting more weight on personal choice than on conforming to norms (Keyes, 2011), and using one's sense of self as the basis of and justifications for life choices (Baumeister, 1991), especially in terms of marriage and other life pursuits.

Contributions, Limitations and Future Direction

Our findings provide evidence for the potential for meaning in life to be experienced in valuing both the self and others, and not just others, as can happen in a marriage-centric society like the Philippines where one's place in society is firmly enmeshed in having a spouse and children (Eviota, 1998). The "shared sense of self" that is core to the value of *kapwa* appears to be a potent source of meaning in life in opposition to the conception of a distinct self-versus-others in Western psychological literature. Reframing singlehood as a privilege that enables one to nurture and protect both the self and one's relations with others could potentially promote meaningfulness in life.

The results can be utilized by relevant stakeholders in crafting policies that highlight the varied social roles single women can potentially take, instead of imposing the typical role of wife and mother, especially when it is not aligned with their authentic selves. The results could also inform mental health professionals working with young, unmarried Filipino women in creating intervention plans and personal development programs that are geared towards identifying and pursuing what is authentic for these women and in developing and nurturing other social relationships apart from a romantic one.

The results of this paper provided rich and nuanced accounts of how advocating for the self and caring for others using the privileges and opportunities found in singlehood have facilitated the experience of meaning in life among the current sample of unmarried, heterosexual, thirty-something Filipinas, which may not be generalized to other groups. Further research

can be conducted to see and understand how similarly or differently meaning in life is experienced by other single women who are in the middle and later stages of their lives, and by different groups of people, like single men, single non-heterosexual individuals, and married people to name a few.

Conclusion

The single, thirty-something Filipino women in our sample presented themselves as living meaningful lives by caring for other people, and by advocating for themselves, specifically, through pursuits that aligned with their authentic selves and that promoted self-development and financial security, using the resources available to them as single people. By engaging in pursuits that benefitted other people, they derived a sense of purpose, satisfaction, and value that their lives mattered not just to them but also to other people. Their sense of meaning in life was also facilitated by empowering themselves, and turning to themselves, as opposed to society and culture, for clarity and validation of their identities, choices, and experiences, especially in the face of negative stereotyping, societal pressures, and some practical disadvantages of being single women in their thirties. However, some cultural norms and roles such as being good daughters and being good Filipino citizens who treat others as their *kapwa* were embraced and highlighted and were found to support a positive source of meaning in life outside of marriage and a romantic relationship.

Samantha Erika N. Mendez is a full time assistant professor of the Department of Psychology at the University of the Philippines Diliman College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. She does research on singlehood, women's issues, meaning in life, well-being, program development, and parenting intervention monitoring and evaluation.

Michelle G. Ong is a full-time faculty member of the University of the Philippines CSSP Dept. of Psychology. Her research interests include: migration, aging, *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, feminist psychology, children's rights and issues. In her work she applies a critical, gendered lens and *Sikolohiyang Pilipino's* concepts, theories, and methods, and explores both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

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