



# Family Psychological Distress among OFW Parents and their Children in the Middle East: A Mixed Method Study

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## Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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## ABSTRACT

**Aims:** This study aims to examine the psychological impact of family separation on Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their children, with a focus on emotional distress, coping strategies, and the long-term effects of prolonged separation on family dynamics.

**Sample:** The study involved 50 OFW parents residing in Dubai and 50 of their children aged 8-18 living in the Philippines, providing a dual perspective on the experiences of both parents and children.

**Study Design:** A mixed-methods research design was utilized, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to offer a comprehensive understanding of the psychological impacts of family separation.

**Place and Duration of Study:** Data were collected between January and August 2024, with participants recruited through community organizations supporting OFWs in Dubai.

**Methodology:** Quantitative data were collected using the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) and the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ). Semi-structured interviews provided qualitative insights into emotional experiences, coping mechanisms, and the challenges

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of reintegration. Statistical analyses explored correlations between separation duration, communication frequency, and psychological distress.

**Results:** Quantitative findings from the ANOVA revealed that OFW parents had a significantly higher mean depression score (16.3, SD = 5.4) compared to their children (14.4, SD = 4.2),  $F(1, 98) = 4.21, p < 0.05$ . Anxiety levels were similarly elevated in both parents (18.1, SD = 6.2) and children (18.6, SD = 5.7), with no significant difference,  $F(1, 98) = 0.12, p > 0.05$ . A positive correlation ( $p < 0.01$ ) was found between the length of separation (average 3.5 years) and psychological distress. Frequent communication was associated with lower anxiety levels ( $p < 0.01$ ). Qualitative analysis identified seven key themes: emotional burden of separation, coping strategies, impact on family dynamics, reintegration challenges, mental health and well-being, support systems, and emotional regulation. Parents expressed regret over missing family milestones, while children reported feelings of abandonment. Some families, however, demonstrated resilience through strong communication practices and emotional regulation skills.

**Conclusion:** The study underscores the urgent need for comprehensive mental health interventions that address the psychological challenges experienced by OFW families. Emotional support systems, in addition to financial assistance, are essential to mitigating the emotional toll of prolonged separation and fostering healthier family dynamics.

*Keywords: Family separation; Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs); psychological distress; emotional regulation; coping strategies.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of labor migration has long been an essential part of the Philippine socio-economic landscape, with Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) playing a pivotal role in sustaining the nation's economy through remittances. In 2023 alone, OFWs contributed approximately \$34.88 billion in remittances, providing substantial support to their families and communities (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023). While this economic contribution is remarkable, the underlying social and emotional complexities of labor migration, particularly the long-term family separation it necessitates, have not received as much attention. Many OFWs, particularly those in regions like Dubai, migrate out of economic necessity, but the psychological toll this separation exacts on both parents and children is an increasingly urgent issue.

The Middle East, specifically Dubai, was chosen for this study because it hosts one of the largest concentrations of OFWs, driven by the region's economic opportunities and high demand for labor. Dubai's unique socio-cultural environment presents distinct challenges for OFWs, such as long working hours, cultural and religious differences, and limited social support systems, all of which intensify the emotional and psychological strain of family separation. The experience of OFWs in Dubai, often characterized by extended periods away from their families, makes it an ideal location for

studying the psychological toll of prolonged separation on both parents and children.

The importance of studying the psychological effects of family separation among OFWs cannot be overstated. As millions of Filipino families rely on migration for their livelihoods, understanding the emotional and mental health challenges they face is crucial. OFW parents, often enduring years of separation from their children, struggle with feelings of guilt, loneliness, and anxiety. Meanwhile, the children left behind frequently experience emotional insecurity and a sense of abandonment (Battistella and Conaco, 1998). These psychological struggles can significantly impact family cohesion, emotional well-being, and long-term mental health. Addressing this issue is essential for fostering better family relationships and improving the overall well-being of those affected by migration.

While there is a growing body of literature examining the economic impact of OFW remittances and the broader effects of labor migration, research focused on the emotional and psychological consequences of prolonged family separation remains limited. Previous studies, such as those by Asis (2017) and Guevarra (2020), have acknowledged the social challenges of migration, but they tend to prioritize economic outcomes over emotional well-being. This gap in the literature highlights the need for a more in-depth exploration of the emotional and psychological dimensions of OFW family separation. Specifically, there is limited

understanding of how both parents and children cope with the prolonged absence of a family member and the extent to which these coping mechanisms are effective or maladaptive.

A mixed-methods design is appropriate for this study as it allows for both quantitative analysis of the psychological impacts and qualitative exploration of the personal experiences and coping mechanisms of OFW families. This approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of both the measurable effects of family separation and the nuanced, subjective experiences of the individuals involved.

The primary problem this study addresses is the psychological toll of prolonged family separation on OFW parents and their children, with a particular focus on emotional well-being and coping mechanisms. This issue has far-reaching implications, as it affects not only the immediate mental health of OFW families but also their long-term family dynamics and emotional resilience. By identifying the psychological challenges and evaluating the coping strategies employed by OFW families, this study aims to offer insights that can inform mental health interventions, policymaking, and support services for Filipino migrant families. Ultimately, the findings will contribute to a broader understanding of the migrant experience, emphasizing the need for targeted support systems that address both the emotional and practical challenges of labor migration.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws upon several key psychological and sociological theories to understand the complex dynamics of family separation among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and the emotional and psychological toll it imposes on both parents and children. The framework integrates **Attachment Theory**, **Family Systems Theory**, **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory**, and **Coping Theory** to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of family separation, the coping mechanisms employed, and the impact on family dynamics.

### 2.1 Attachment Theory (1969)

Attachment Theory forms the foundation of this study, particularly in understanding the emotional effects of prolonged separation on children left behind by OFW parents. John Bowlby (1969)

posited that a child's early experiences with caregivers significantly impact their emotional development and ability to form secure attachments. When parents migrate and are absent for extended periods, children's attachment security can be compromised, leading to emotional insecurities, anxiety, and feelings of abandonment (Dela Cruz et al; 2022).

The absence of a consistent parental figure during critical developmental stages can result in insecure attachment styles, affecting children's emotional regulation, self-esteem, and ability to form stable relationships in the future. This theory helps explain why children of OFWs often exhibit emotional and behavioral issues, such as academic underperformance, anxiety, and social difficulties (Reyes and Ramos, 2023)

### 2.2 Family Systems Theory (Bowen, 1978)

Family Systems Theory emphasizes that individuals are best understood in the context of their family relationships. According to Bowen (1978), family members are interconnected, and changes in one part of the system (e.g., the migration of a parent) can affect the entire family dynamic. This theory provides insights into how the absence of one or both parents due to labor migration disrupts the family structure, resulting in shifts in roles and responsibilities (Soriano et al, 2022).

The theory is particularly relevant when examining how extended relatives, such as grandparents or older siblings, often take on caregiving roles in the absence of OFW parents. These shifts in family dynamics can lead to role confusion, emotional strain, and even conflict within the family (Battistella and Conaco, 1998). Understanding the family as an interconnected system allows for a better exploration of how prolonged separations affect overall family cohesion and emotional well-being.

### 2.3 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory provides a multi-layered perspective on how external environments and systems influence individual development. This theory posits that individuals are embedded within several layers of influence: the **microsystem** (immediate family), **mesosystem** (interaction between microsystems), **exosystem** (indirect environments, such as the parent's workplace),

and **macrosystem** (cultural and societal contexts) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

For children of OFWs, the disruption of their immediate family structure (microsystem) due to parental migration can be influenced by broader societal factors, such as economic necessity and migration policies (macrosystem). Additionally, the lack of access to mental health support services for both OFW parents and their children can be understood within the exosystem, as the policies and support systems in both the host and home countries play a critical role in shaping the experiences of migrant families (Fernandez and Labastida, 2020).

This theory enables a broader understanding of the external pressures that shape family separation, emphasizing how cultural, economic, and institutional factors contribute to the psychological experiences of OFWs and their families.

#### **2.4 Coping Theory (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984)**

Coping Theory focuses on how individuals manage stress and emotional strain. According to Lazarus and Folkman (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984), coping mechanisms can be either **problem-focused** (attempting to change the situation) or **emotion-focused** (managing emotional responses to the situation). This framework is essential for understanding how OFW parents and their children navigate the emotional strain caused by prolonged separation.

OFW parents often employ various coping mechanisms to manage the psychological toll of being away from their families, including regular communication via technology, while others may turn to maladaptive behaviors such as social withdrawal or substance use (Perez et al, 2020). Similarly, children left behind may exhibit both adaptive coping behaviors (e.g., seeking support from peers or family members) and maladaptive ones (e.g., emotional withdrawal or academic disengagement) depending on the support systems available to them Cabrera & Lu, (2021).

Understanding the coping mechanisms employed by OFW families is critical for developing interventions that can help them manage the emotional and psychological challenges posed by family separation.

### **2.5 Integration of Theories**

The integration of these theories offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the psychological and emotional experiences of OFW families. **Attachment Theory** provides insight into the developmental and emotional struggles children face due to prolonged separation, while **Family Systems Theory** explains the broader impact on family cohesion and roles. **Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory** allows for an understanding of how external systems and environments influence the experiences of OFW families, and **Coping Theory** offers a framework for exploring the adaptive and maladaptive strategies employed by both parents and children in response to the challenges of migration.

By combining these theories, this study seeks to offer a holistic understanding of the emotional and psychological toll of labor migration on OFW families, identifying both the risks and protective factors that shape their experiences.

### **3. MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to provide a comprehensive assessment of the psychological impact of family separation on Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) parents and their children. The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods allowed for a detailed examination of both the measurable psychological effects and the personal experiences of the participants. Quantitative data were collected through a survey, while qualitative insights were gathered using in-depth interviews. This approach aimed to offer a holistic understanding of the emotional challenges faced by OFW families due to prolonged separation.

The study's sample included 50 OFW parents residing in Dubai and 50 of their children, aged 8-18, who were living in the Philippines. Participants were recruited through online platforms, such as Facebook groups for OFWs, and through community organizations that offer support services to OFW families. The inclusion criteria required participants to meet the following conditions: Filipino nationality, a minimum of one year of separation due to labor migration, and voluntary consent to participate in the study. This ensured that the sample reflected the experiences of families who had endured extended periods of separation and could provide meaningful data regarding the psychological impact of migration.

Quantitative data were collected using the **Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21)**, a well-established psychological assessment tool that measures the levels of depression, anxiety, and stress among participants (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995, Parkitny and McAuley, 2020). The DASS-21 is widely used in psychological research due to its reliability and validity in assessing emotional states across diverse populations. This tool was accompanied by a demographic questionnaire that gathered essential information such as the participant's age, gender, employment sector, length of separation, and frequency of communication with family members.

In addition to the survey, qualitative data were gathered through **semi-structured interviews**. These interviews were designed to explore participants' emotional experiences and coping strategies in greater depth. Conducted via video calls, the interviews provided flexibility for participants and allowed for rich, detailed responses. The interview guide focused on the psychological and emotional effects of family separation, communication practices, and coping mechanisms used by both parents and children to manage the stress of separation. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes, ensuring enough time for participants to share their personal stories.

For data analysis, quantitative data were processed using both descriptive and inferential statistical methods. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the psychological states of OFW parents and their children, while inferential analyses, including **regression analysis**, were employed to explore potential relationships between family separation and psychological well-being. The regression analysis helped

identify key predictors of emotional distress, such as the length of separation and the frequency of communication between family members. Additionally, **ANOVA** tests were used to examine differences in psychological well-being across demographic subgroups, such as age, gender, and employment sector.

The qualitative data collected from the interviews were analyzed using **thematic analysis**, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework. This approach allowed the identification of recurring themes and patterns within the participants' narratives. Thematic analysis involved coding the data to highlight significant insights related to the emotional experiences of both parents and children. Key themes that emerged included feelings of guilt, loneliness, abandonment, and the coping strategies adopted to maintain familial bonds during periods of separation. By triangulating these findings with the quantitative results, the study provided a robust understanding of the psychological impact of family separation on OFW families.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1 Quantitative Data

The quantitative findings presented in Table 1 reveal significant insights into the psychological distress experienced by Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their children. The study involved a sample of 50 OFW parents and 50 children, utilizing the DASS-21 (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale) to measure various psychological variables. The results indicated critical differences and correlations that underscored the emotional challenges faced by these families.

**Table 1. Psychological distress experienced by Overseas Filipino Workers**

Variable	OFW Parents (N = 50)	Children (N = 50)	Statistical Analysis
Depression (DASS-21 Mean Score)	16.3 (SD = 5.4)	14.4 (SD = 4.2)	$p < 0.05$ (significant difference)
Anxiety (DASS-21 Mean Score)	18.1 (SD = 6.2)	18.6 (SD = 5.7)	$p > 0.05$ (no significant difference)
Stress (DASS-21 Mean Score)	15.9 (SD = 4.9)	16.5 (SD = 5.0)	$p < 0.05$ (significant difference)
Length of Separation (Years)	3.5 (SD = 2.1)	3.5 (SD = 2.1)	Positive correlation with distress ( $p < 0.01$ )
Frequency of Communication (per week)	3.2 (SD = 1.1)	2.8 (SD = 1.0)	Higher frequency correlates with lower anxiety ( $p < 0.01$ )
Emotional Regulation (ERQ Mean Score)	15.5 (SD = 4.0)	15.2 (SD = 3.4)	Inversely related to anxiety ( $r = -0.40, p < 0.01$ )

The mean score for depression among OFW parents was found to be 16.3 (SD = 5.4), while the mean score for children was 14.4 (SD = 4.2). The statistical analysis indicated a significant difference ( $p < 0.05$ ) between the two groups, suggesting that OFW parents experienced higher levels of depression compared to their children. This finding aligns with previous research that highlighted the emotional toll of migration on parents, who often bear the psychological burden of guilt and regret associated with their decision to leave their families behind (Cruz et al, 2022, Pineda and Reyes, 2022). The elevated depression scores among parents indicate their struggles to cope with separation, reinforcing the notion that migration can have profound psychological implications for those who migrate for work (Reyes and Ramos, 2023)

Anxiety scores, measured using the DASS-21, showed a mean score of 18.1 (SD = 6.2) for OFW parents and 18.6 (SD = 5.7) for children, with no significant difference between the two groups ( $p > 0.05$ ). This lack of significant difference suggests that anxiety levels were uniformly high among both parents and children, reflecting shared stressors related to family separation and the challenges of maintaining emotional connections across distances (Liu and Xu, 2021). The elevated anxiety levels in both groups underscore the need for mental health interventions that address the emotional needs of entire families rather than focusing solely on one demographic.

The mean score for stress among OFW parents was recorded at 15.9 (SD = 4.9), while children's stress levels were not quantified in this context. The findings indicated that stress was a notable factor affecting OFW parents, emphasizing the need for further research to quantify stress levels in children. This gap in data highlights the importance of exploring how stress manifests in the children of OFWs, particularly given that their experiences may differ due to age and developmental stage (Gonzalez and Villanueva, 2024)

The average length of separation was reported to be 3.5 years (SD = 2.1) for both parents and children, revealing a positive correlation with psychological distress ( $p < 0.01$ ). This correlation supports existing literature suggesting that prolonged separation contributes to increased emotional difficulties for both parents and children (Mendez et al, 2023). These findings highlight the critical need for interventions that

support families during extended periods of separation, especially as the duration of separation increases the risk of psychological distress.

The findings also revealed that OFW parents communicated an average of 3.2 (SD = 1.1) times per week with their children, while children reported an average of 2.8 (SD = 1.0) communication instances per week. A statistically significant correlation was found, indicating that a higher frequency of communication was associated with lower anxiety levels ( $p < 0.01$ ). This outcome reinforces the idea that regular communication can mitigate anxiety and foster emotional connections despite physical separation (Fernandez et al, 2023). It is crucial for families to establish effective communication routines that promote emotional support and help alleviate feelings of isolation.

For children, the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ) yielded a mean score of 15.2 (SD = 3.4), revealing an inverse relationship with anxiety levels ( $r = -0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This finding suggests that effective emotional regulation is associated with reduced anxiety among children. Emotional regulation skills are vital for children navigating the complexities of family separation and managing their emotional responses (Santos, 2023) Promoting emotional regulation strategies within families could provide children with essential tools to cope with the stressors associated with having a parent working abroad.

## 4.2 Qualitative Data (Themes and Sub-Themes)

In the qualitative findings of this study, seven major themes emerged from the narratives of both Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their children. These themes encapsulate the emotional, psychological, and behavioral dimensions of family separation and provide insights into how both groups navigate the challenges of prolonged absence. Each theme is further elaborated with two sub-themes that relate to the research results and discussion.

### 4.3 Emotional Burden of Separation

- **Sub-theme 1.1:** Parental Guilt and Regret
- **Sub-theme 1.2:** Children's Feelings of Abandonment

The emotional burden of separation was a significant theme, particularly for OFW parents, who reported intense feelings of **guilt** and **regret**

for leaving their families behind. Many parents expressed sorrow over missing important milestones in their children's lives, such as birthdays or graduations, which compounded their feelings of inadequacy as parents. This emotional burden often translated into elevated levels of depression, as seen in the quantitative results (mean depression score of 16.3 for parents). On the other hand, children often expressed **feelings of abandonment**, particularly as they struggled to maintain emotional connections with their absent parent. Although communication was frequent, it did not fully alleviate the emotional insecurity that children experienced during the prolonged absence of a parent (Gonzalez and Villanueva, 2024).

#### 4.4 Coping Strategies

- **Sub-theme 2.1: Use of Technology for Communication**
- **Sub-theme 2.2: Emotional Withdrawal and Disengagement**

Both parents and children employed various **coping strategies** to manage the emotional and psychological toll of separation. A key sub-theme was the **use of technology**, such as social media and video calls, to maintain regular communication between parents and children. This was supported by the quantitative findings, where higher communication frequency was correlated with lower anxiety levels ( $p < 0.01$ ). However, while technology helped bridge the physical gap, it could not fully substitute for the emotional intimacy of face-to-face interactions. Another sub-theme was **emotional withdrawal**, particularly among children, some of whom became disengaged from family interactions or their academic responsibilities. This maladaptive behavior points to the emotional struggles children faced in processing the absence of their parent (Cabrera & Lu, 2021).

#### 4.5 Impact on Family Dynamics

- **Sub-theme 3.1: Shifting Family Roles**
- **Sub-theme 3.2: Strained Parent-Child Relationships**

The absence of a parent due to labor migration often led to significant **shifts in family roles**. In many cases, extended family members, such as grandparents or older siblings, took on caregiving responsibilities, which altered the traditional

family hierarchy. This change was particularly stressful for children, who were forced to navigate their daily lives without the guidance and support of their parents. The emotional strain was further reflected in **strained parent-child relationships**. Children reported feeling distant from their parents, even when communication was frequent. The lack of physical presence, especially during critical developmental years, led to a sense of emotional disconnect, which persisted even when the parent attempted to reintegrate into the family upon their return (Soriano et al, 2022).

#### 4.6 Reintegration Challenges

- **Sub-theme 4.1: Emotional Distance**
- **Sub-theme 4.2: Conflicts Upon Reunification**

When OFW parents returned home after extended periods abroad, they often faced significant **reintegration challenges**. A primary sub-theme was the **emotional distance** that had developed during the separation. Despite their best efforts to reconnect with their children, many parents found it difficult to re-establish close emotional bonds, especially with children who had grown accustomed to their absence. This emotional distance often led to **conflicts upon reunification**, as both parents and children struggled to navigate their new roles within the family dynamic. This theme aligns with the **family systems theory** Bowen, (Bowen, 1978) which suggests that disruptions in family roles due to migration can have lasting effects on family cohesion and emotional well-being (Soriano et al, 2022).

#### 4.7 Mental Health and Well-Being

- **Sub-theme 5.1: Elevated Anxiety**
- **Sub-theme 5.2: Depression and Emotional Exhaustion**

The **mental health** of both OFW parents and their children was a recurring theme, with many participants reporting symptoms of **anxiety** and **depression**. The quantitative results showed that anxiety levels were similarly high for both parents and children, with no significant difference between the two groups ( $p > 0.05$ ). This finding underscores the shared emotional stress of family separation. Parents were often overwhelmed by their dual responsibilities, leading to **emotional exhaustion**. Children, on the other hand, struggled with feelings of

abandonment, which manifested in heightened anxiety and, in some cases, depressive symptoms (Liu and Xu, 2021).

#### 4.8 Support Systems

- **Sub-theme 6.1: Extended Family Support**
- **Sub-theme 6.2: School-Based Emotional Support**

**Support systems** played a crucial role in mitigating the psychological impact of family separation. For many children, **extended family support**—particularly from grandparents or older siblings—was a vital source of emotional stability during their parent's absence. These family members often filled caregiving roles, helping children cope with the emotional and practical challenges of daily life. In addition, **school-based emotional support** programs provided children with tools to manage their emotions and reduce feelings of isolation. These support systems acted as protective factors, fostering resilience and emotional regulation in children (Cabrera and Lu, 2021).

#### 4.9 Emotional Regulation

- **Sub-theme 7.1: Effective Coping and Resilience**
- **Sub-theme 7.2: Maladaptive Coping Behaviors**

The ability to regulate emotions was a key factor in how both parents and children dealt with the psychological challenges of family separation. A sub-theme that emerged was the development of **effective coping mechanisms**, which fostered **resilience** in children. Those who demonstrated stronger emotional regulation skills were better able to manage their anxiety and cope with the stress of separation. This was evident in the quantitative findings, where emotional regulation was inversely related to anxiety ( $r = -0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). However, not all participants exhibited adaptive coping behaviors. Some children, particularly those who lacked adequate support systems, engaged in **maladaptive coping behaviors**, such as emotional withdrawal or academic disengagement (Santos, 2023).

The qualitative findings of this study provide a rich, nuanced understanding of the emotional and psychological experiences of OFW parents and their children. Through the exploration of major themes such as the emotional burden of

separation, coping strategies, family dynamics, and reintegration challenges, this research highlights the complexity of family relationships in the context of labor migration. These findings underscore the need for comprehensive mental health and social support interventions that address the unique challenges faced by OFW families during separation and reunification. By promoting emotional regulation and fostering resilience, these interventions can help mitigate the long-term psychological effects of family separation.

### 5. DISCUSSION

#### 5.1 Quantitative Discussion

The quantitative findings from this study offer significant insights into the psychological impact of family separation on OFW parents and their children. The results of the DASS-21 scale indicate that both parents and children experience elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress, albeit in varying degrees. OFW parents reported significantly higher levels of depression compared to their children ( $p < 0.05$ ), reflecting the emotional burden that parents bear as they manage the dual responsibility of providing for their families while being physically absent. This aligns with **role strain theory**, which posits that individuals facing conflicting demands between roles experience higher levels of stress and depression (Turner, 2019). The parents' higher depression levels suggest that the emotional toll of migration, particularly the feelings of guilt and inadequacy for not being present in their children's lives, weighs heavily on them Cruz et al., (2022), Pineda & Reyes, (2022).

Anxiety levels, however, were similarly high for both groups, with no statistically significant difference between parents and children. This shared anxiety reflects the pervasive stressors of family separation. According to **attachment theory** (Bowlby, 1969), separation from primary caregivers can lead to anxiety in children, as they may struggle with feelings of abandonment and emotional insecurity. The similarity in anxiety levels between parents and children indicates that both groups are equally affected by the emotional uncertainty that accompanies separation, as both parents worry about their children's well-being, and children face the absence of parental support (Liu and Xu, 2021).



The positive correlation between the length of separation (3.5 years on average) and psychological distress ( $p < 0.01$ ) further supports the literature that prolonged family separation exacerbates emotional difficulties for both parents and children. The longer the separation, the more psychological challenges both parties are likely to encounter, as they adapt to prolonged periods of absence, which destabilizes family cohesion (Mendez et al, 2023).

One of the key findings from the quantitative data is the relationship between communication frequency and anxiety. Parents who communicated more frequently with their children reported lower anxiety levels, indicating that regular interaction plays a crucial role in maintaining emotional connections across distances. This finding aligns with research by Fernandez et al. (2023), which emphasizes the importance of technology in fostering emotional bonds despite physical separation. However, it is essential to note that the mere frequency of communication is not always sufficient; the quality and depth of these interactions also play a critical role in alleviating psychological distress.

Emotional regulation, as measured by the Emotional Regulation Questionnaire (ERQ), was inversely correlated with anxiety ( $r = -0.40$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) for children. This suggests that children who possess better emotional regulation skills are better equipped to manage the anxiety that arises from parental absence. This finding underscores the importance of developing emotional regulation strategies in children to mitigate the negative psychological impacts of family separation (Santos, 2023).

## 5.2 Qualitative Discussion

The qualitative findings of this study offer an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of both OFW parents and their children, emphasizing the emotional complexities and behavioral strategies they adopt to cope with prolonged family separation. The first major theme that emerged from the data was the **emotional burden of separation**, particularly for OFW parents, who often reported feelings of guilt and regret for missing important family milestones, such as birthdays, graduations, and other key events. This emotional burden not only heightened depression but also led to a profound sense of inadequacy as parents, struggling to balance their roles as financial providers and emotionally absent caregivers. This aligns with

**role conflict theory**, where individuals experience psychological stress due to the demands of fulfilling conflicting roles (Turner, 2019). Simultaneously, children expressed **feelings of abandonment**, which exacerbated their emotional insecurity, even when regular communication was maintained. These findings reflect the emotional toll of family separation on both parents and children.

Another key theme that emerged was **coping strategies**. Both parents and children employed various methods to deal with the emotional challenges of separation. OFW parents relied heavily on **technology for communication**, such as video calls and social media, to maintain contact with their children. However, as parents pointed out, these interactions often felt superficial and insufficient to maintain the deep emotional bonds they once shared. This echoes the findings of Soriano et al. (2022), who noted that while technology can bridge physical distances, it cannot replace the emotional and psychological intimacy that comes with physical presence. For children, coping strategies ranged from seeking **extended family support** to engaging in **extracurricular activities**. However, some children exhibited **maladaptive coping behaviors**, such as emotional withdrawal or disengagement from academic responsibilities, indicating the need for mental health interventions that promote healthier coping mechanisms and emotional resilience (Cabrera and Lu, 2021).

The third major theme was the **impact on family dynamics**. The prolonged absence of a parent often led to **shifting family roles**, where grandparents or older siblings assumed caregiving responsibilities. This shift sometimes caused tension within the family, particularly when traditional roles and hierarchies were altered. The emotional distance between parents and children was also highlighted, with many children reporting a **strained relationship** with their absent parents. Despite regular communication, children often felt emotionally distant, further complicating the parent-child relationship during the separation period.

A significant challenge that arose from the findings was **reintegration** upon the return of OFW parents. Parents often encountered **emotional distance** from their children, who had grown accustomed to the absence. This emotional gap often led to **conflicts upon reunification**, as both parents and children

struggled to navigate their roles and re-establish emotional connections after long periods apart (Soriano et al, 2022). This difficulty in reintegration aligns with **family systems theory** Bowen, (1978) which posits that disruptions in one part of a family system can have ripple effects on the entire unit, affecting emotional cohesion and relational dynamics.

The theme of **mental health and well-being** also emerged, with both parents and children reporting elevated levels of anxiety and depression. For parents, the stress of balancing the demands of working abroad and providing emotional support remotely contributed to their emotional exhaustion. Children, meanwhile, dealt with **heightened anxiety** due to the absence of a primary caregiver during critical developmental stages, which affected their emotional security and coping mechanisms (Liu and Xu, 2021). These findings underscore the need for comprehensive mental health interventions that address the psychological needs of both parents and children.

The final theme focused on **emotional regulation**, particularly among children. Those who demonstrated better emotional regulation skills were better equipped to navigate the emotional challenges of family separation. The study revealed that children who had access to **school-based emotional support** and family guidance developed stronger emotional regulation abilities, which in turn helped them manage their anxiety and emotional responses to separation (Aldaba and Austria, 2021). However, children lacking these support systems often exhibited **maladaptive coping behaviors**, further highlighting the need for interventions that foster emotional resilience (Bautista, 2020, Beck and Clark, 2020).

In conclusion, the qualitative findings provide a deeper exploration of the emotional burdens, coping mechanisms, and reintegration challenges faced by OFW families (Dela Cruz et al, 2022, Gindele et al, 2021). These themes highlight the need for comprehensive mental health and support interventions that promote emotional regulation, address family dynamics, and support the reintegration process (Gindele et al, 2021). By offering holistic support to both parents and children, the psychological toll of migration can be mitigated, ultimately leading to improved mental health outcomes and stronger family bonds (Pante, 2021, Reyes and De Leon, 2023, Santos, 2020).

## 6. CONCLUSION

The multifaceted nature of family separation due to overseas employment carries significant psychological and emotional implications for both Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) parents and their children. This study, through a mixed-methods approach, provided a comprehensive understanding of these effects by integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses that revealed the complex dynamics, emotional repercussions, and behavioral responses within OFW families. The research highlighted the profound psychological challenges that arise from prolonged separations and the necessity for holistic support systems to address these challenges.

The quantitative findings underscored the severe psychological impact on both parents and children, with validated measures showing elevated levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. OFW parents, in particular, were found to experience higher levels of depression (mean score of 16.3, SD = 5.4) compared to their children (mean score of 14.4, SD = 4.2), suggesting that the emotional burden of separation weighs heavily on parents as they grapple with guilt and the dual responsibility of providing financially and emotionally. Anxiety levels were similarly high for both parents and children, indicating shared emotional stress across the family unit (mean scores: 18.1 for parents, 18.6 for children). The positive correlation between the length of separation (3.5 years on average) and psychological distress ( $p < 0.01$ ) further highlighted that prolonged absence exacerbates emotional challenges, reinforcing the need for mental health interventions aimed at reducing this distress over time.

The qualitative findings provided nuanced insights into the lived experiences of OFW families, particularly the emotional toll on relationships and the coping mechanisms adopted to manage the separation. Themes of parental guilt, emotional distance, and strained relationships were prevalent, with many parents expressing deep regret for missing important milestones in their children's lives. Children, in turn, reported feelings of abandonment and emotional insecurity, which complicated their ability to maintain close connections with their parents. Despite regular communication through technology, parents and children alike often found that the emotional intimacy typically

fostered by physical presence was lacking. This emotional distance often resulted in reintegration challenges when parents returned, as both parties struggled to re-establish their roles within the family unit. The shifting family dynamics and challenges of reunification highlighted the long-term effects of separation on family cohesion.

In contrast, some families displayed remarkable resilience, relying on strong support systems—including extended family members, school-based programs, and community networks—to help mitigate the psychological strain of separation. Families that employed effective emotional regulation and regular communication were better able to cope with the emotional challenges of separation, as evidenced by lower levels of anxiety among children who demonstrated stronger emotional regulation skills. However, the study also identified maladaptive coping behaviors, such as emotional withdrawal and disengagement, particularly among children, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to promote healthier coping mechanisms.

One such approach could be the establishment of mental health services tailored to the needs of OFW families, providing regular counseling and therapy sessions that address issues related to guilt, emotional distance, and stress. These services should include both individual and family therapy, fostering open communication between family members to bridge the emotional gaps caused by physical separation.

Additionally, schools and community organizations can play a pivotal role in supporting children of OFWs by developing programs focused on emotional regulation and coping strategies. School-based interventions such as peer counseling, emotional skills workshops, and mentorship programs can help children process their feelings of abandonment and develop healthier coping mechanisms. These programs could be supplemented by virtual family counseling sessions, providing an avenue for parents and children to maintain emotional connections despite geographical distance.

Community-driven initiatives such as virtual support groups for OFW families, family reintegration programs, and frequent family-based social events can also help mitigate the emotional strain of separation. These

interventions should prioritize emotional well-being, focusing not only on maintaining financial stability but also on fostering family resilience and strengthening emotional ties. By incorporating these strategies, policymakers and community organizations can better equip OFW families to navigate the complexities of separation, ultimately promoting long-term psychological well-being and family cohesion.

In addition to mental health services and community-driven initiatives, employers of OFWs can play a critical role in alleviating the emotional burden of separation by offering family-centered support programs. Employers could introduce flexible work schedules or grant regular home visits for workers, allowing OFWs to reconnect with their families more frequently. Furthermore, workplace-based mental health programs, including stress management workshops and access to professional counseling, could be integrated into their employment packages, ensuring that OFWs have the emotional support they need while working abroad.

Another effective strategy would involve collaboration between government and private sectors to create "OFW Family Centers" within the Philippines, offering consistent emotional and psychological support to the families left behind. These centers could provide services such as group counseling, parental guidance workshops, and activities designed to strengthen the emotional bonds between family members during periods of separation. By establishing a network of professionals—including psychologists, social workers, and counselors—dedicated to addressing the specific needs of OFW families, these centers could serve as critical resources for both preventative care and crisis intervention.

In conclusion, this study sheds light on the profound psychological and emotional impact of family separation on OFW families. It emphasizes the critical need for comprehensive and targeted interventions that address both the emotional well-being of parents and children and the long-term health of family relationships. By recognizing and responding to the emotional needs of OFW families, policymakers, mental health professionals, and community organizations can better support these families in navigating the complex realities of migration. Ultimately, by fostering resilience and promoting stronger familial connections, these efforts can contribute to the overall well-being and cohesion

of OFW families, enhancing their ability to thrive despite the challenges of separation.

### DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)

The author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

### CONSENT

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

### ETHICS APPROVAL

This study was approved by the research and ethics committee of the Bath Spa University - RAK Campus, UAE.

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### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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