OFW* WOMEN IN MANUFACTURING: A CRITICAL ETHNOGRAPHY EXPLORING CULTURAL HYBRIDITIES

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*Overseas Filipino Workers
Image: Apple, 2014
The Research: Exploring Cultural Hybridities

What – an ethnographic study of female OFWs working in Taiwan’s manufacturing industry with the aim of exploring how they negotiate from their minoritarian position and construct cultural hybridities that they draw from to survive in a foreign environment as transnational migrant workers.

Why – Philippines is a top labour exporting country with over 10.4 million OFWs worldwide. Taiwan is a top destination as Taiwanese factories recruit ‘en-masse’ from the Philippines through a bilateral agreement. Majority of recruits are women with ‘destination work’ in manufacturing. Literature review of the topic showed a gap in the literature and this study aims to address that.

Where – webnography: online, subjects/users located in Taiwan; ethnography: manufacturing sites with OFW enclaves in Taipei, Taichung and Kaoshiung, Taiwan

Who – female Overseas Filipino workers employed as transnational contract workers in Taiwan’s factories; OFWs in Taiwan current number around 54,000 with half constituted by women working in factories (Sun, 2013).

Researcher fit – researcher is an OFW with cultural expertise, deep knowledge of subject based on ‘lived-through’ experience and social connections that can be comprehensively utilized to undertake the study.
Sample Philippine ‘OFWs-for-Taiwan’ Recruitment Adverts

**EYEQUEST INTERNATIONAL MANPOWER SERVICES INC.**
Marina: Unit 1302, Vareeb Mansion, #1679 Makati Sts, Makati, Manila Tel: 02-5210853
Cebu: Room 206 C&D Bldg. (formerly Gorones Bldg.) Osmins Blvd. Tel: 032-3560739
Davao: Room 3 & 4, 2nd Floor, P & E Bldg. C.M Recto St. Davao City Tel: 082-3053695

**BIODATA SELECTION FOR VARIOUS COMPANIES**

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**WE CONDUCT DAILY SCREENING**

**OSE Orient Semiconductor Electronics**

**KAOSHIUNG TAIWAN**

**FEMALE: 150 CM ABOVE**
- At least 2 years Vocational Graduate and 4 years College Graduate of any courses;
- With work experienced in Philippine big manufacturer companies such as Texas Instrument, CYPRESS, AMKOR for more than one year is an advantage;
- A BGA – front or back end work experienced is a plus;
- Good English communication skills, good learning attitude, very cooperative, positive working attitude, good response,
- Can work long period of time in standing position.

Accept Ex-Taiwan ; Accept Left-Handed; Can be near sighted; Corrected vision acuity of 1.0 or more must wear eyeglasses at work; No Tattoo; Not Colorblind

Qualified applicants should report in our nearest EQ office before interview for coaching and orientation. You may Email us at mpp@eqmanpower.com / resume@eqmanpower.com

TAIWAN FACTORY DEPARTMENT: ALNA / JUSTINE / MARIANNE - 09282854924 / 09228588641 / 09273170074

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**EYEQUEST INTERNATIONAL MANPOWER SERVICES INC.**
Marina: Unit1302, Vareeb Mansion, #1679 Makati Sts, Makati, Manila Tel: 02-5210853
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FOR MANPOWER POOLING ONLY. NO FEES TO BE COLLECTED. FIGHT ILLEGAL RECRUITERS

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Research Questions

1. What are the employment experiences of female Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in manufacturing work in Taiwan?

2. How do gender, ethnicity and class shape their experiences and their strategies of negotiating difference and similarity in Taiwan?

3. How do female OFWs working in manufacturing in Taiwan creatively construct their cultural identities within the context of migration?
Key concepts for the study

- Cultural hybridity (influenced by Bhabha)
- Minoritarian position & empowerment* subject to conditions
- Interstitial/third/in-between spaces
- Borderlands (ends/beginnings/extensions/blurs – influenced by Anzaldúa)
- ‘hindi na siya’ – Filipino common-sense belief of expressing a ‘changed self’*
- ‘bago pero dati’ – Filipino reference to a self that is always changing while still retaining what they recognise as essentially being that ‘person’*
- ‘Dalawang isip’ – Filipino reference to a self having 2 minds or a new hesitant personality*

*emergent in the study so far
Methodology - webnography (pilot) & ethnography (fieldwork)

- **Ethnography** – the researcher taking part in the daily lives of the subjects of study, for a particular period of time, observing what happens, listening and watching, asking questions, making inquiries, collecting data in an attempt to explore a phenomenon, seek specific information, and find answers to questions that are the subject of the research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

- **Webnography** – an iteration of the practice of ethnography as a method on the ‘web’ through social interactions mediated by computers, smartphones, software & hardware connected to the internet. Related terms include cyber ethnography, netnography and virtual ethnography (Evans, 2010).

- Transcribed text-data from Online chatrooms/forums, social media comments exchange, one-on-one interviews, audio/video recordings over skype & other VOIP/VVOIP platforms

- Transcribed data from face-to-face interviews, focus groups data recorded as fieldnotes, audio/video recordings
Methodology - continued

- Method is a combination of ‘real & virtual’ sites of study.

- Why Ethnography – offers the possibility of undertaking a detailed study into a contextualized/situated social phenomenon in unfamiliar settings to provide insight via in-depth studies of individuals, peoples and cultures encapsulated within the site.

- Why Webnography – digitally practical, as subjects of study are geographically located in another country (Taiwan); subjects of study are deeply entrenched in social media and utilize the web to keep connected to family & friends in the Philippines; Filipinos rank #1 in the world in time spent online on social media, i.e., forums, Instagram, blogs, Facebook, Twitter (Camus, 2017).

- Webnography will be utilized to initially explore the field, identify gatekeepers and individuals, and to undertake pilot study and later on, post ‘real fieldwork’ to connect to subjects, keep abreast with new developments. Fieldwork (ethnography) will build on connections, relations, information and knowledge gained form the pilot study (RAI, 2017).

- Means of data collection from participants – (formal/arranged) one-on-one interviews, focus groups and (informal, based on immersion) data collected from chatrooms and online forum discussions, information noted via fieldnotes from exchanges/discourses in the field especially from interstitial spaces.

- Much of the immersion takes the form of a ‘Deep Hanging Out’ (Geertz, 1998) with researcher considering self as an OFW and is thus partly already in with expertise in language and culture ascribed to, on the general with data and insight drawn at informal interactions/discourses.
Knowing through Webnography

Making sense of the Web field

Reviewing materials that utilize Webnography:
- Webnographies related to subject of study, webnographies in general
- Locating Web Sources - Subjects - Gatekeepers

Identifying Specifics

Online Forums frequented by subjects
- Social Media Used by subjects
- Gatekeepers
- Processes - How, who, why, when, where
- Ethics, permissions Challenges, limitations

Reaching out to Specifics

Social media groups, web forums, chatrooms formal (arranged by organizations) and informal (created by OFWs themselves)
- Formal and informal groups (NGOS, Religious/community groups, workplace-formed, etc.) and individuals (gatekeepers, potential participants.
- Embedding the self as ‘participant/observer’

‘Doing’

Immersion
- Data gathering & Initial analysis
- Specific Case Studies (individuals/focus groups, insight from interstitial spaces)
- Emergent information/pattern analysis
- ‘Writing up’ of findings & implications to thesis and ‘real’ fieldwork
OFW Discourse - Marawi
Excerpts from Informal Forums

About the Marawi ‘Excerpt’

- **Main subject of Talk** – the city of Marawi Siege by ISIL forces from May to Oct 2017
- **Site** – an OFW forum exchange on pinoyexchange.com.ph
- **Speakers** – 3 female OFWs: TitaBaby, Nene82, NanayTess
- **Context** – they talk about a fellow OFW whose brother has not been heard from since the siege and is feared to either be dead or made to fight by ISIL

### Key Findings

- Using Marawi as a reference point, they ‘locate’ themselves in the discussion – their beliefs, their politics, their ‘lived-through’ knowledge of life as an OFW in Taiwan as well as assert their own personalities and attempt to ‘protect’ what they see as ideal by taking positions in the discussion.
- They are **deeply aware of where they stand** among themselves and in the larger Taiwanese society as transnational workers and seem to accept their **Minoritarian position**.
- Their discussion seem to **empower** them as it **reframes issues** and put things in context, allowing them to still ‘act’ to affect things back home (over big issues) and where they are both in virtual and real spaces.
Some passages from Marawi excerpt

TitaBaby: Have you guys seen the video on YouTube uploaded by a stranded student in Marawi city center?
Nene82: ...It’s what we talked about at break in the factory today. Even our line manager joined in the conversation. Inday, our co-worker from Lanao was crying. She said her brother studies in Marawi and they have not heard from him for a week already...She thinks she should go back and look for her brother.
NanayTess: What? That’s a bad idea. She should stay put. More than ever her family needs the money she makes here. What good will going to Marawi do? It’s too dangerous. There is an exodus of people coming out...

.......... NanayTess: Today over lunch at the cafeteria I overheard some of the (Taiwanese) workers talking about how dangerous it is to be so close to the Philippines. They are afraid that if Marawi will totally fall to ISIL, that slowly terror activities will creep up to Taiwan. They said it’s bad enough that they have the communists (China) to worry about. They also talked to us briefly about Marawi and they said that Taiwan should help because it’s a regional issue.
TitaBaby: I don’t blame them, Taipei is just a few hours flight from Manila, and Filipinos can get in visa-free for 15 days now for tourist visits.
Nene82: ... My sister wanted to visit me because there are cheap flights now from Clark Airport in Pampanga. About $120 return on Cebu Pacific. She said she wanted to come and work here too to help me.
NanayTess: Hey Nene, be careful about that. That would be stupid, really stupid. The Taiwanese authorities are very strict nowadays. Airport-issued 15-day visas ask for details of ‘Sponsor in Taiwan’ if they are not staying in hotels and you will likely have to be that for your sister and you will answer for her to Taiwan immigration. If your sister wants to work here, then ask her to apply at your agency in Manila so that she comes here with complete papers and have a job waiting. If not, it can affect your status too especially since employers do not want any headache with immigration due to a problematic employee.
How the researcher has come to know

• **Literature Review** and keeping updated with emerging literature on the subject and related ideas

• **Discussions** with supervisors & subject-matter experts, personalities that have varied knowledge of or experience of the subject of study including gatekeepers, the subjects of study themselves through the process of data collection

• **Rumination/Reflection/Analysis** of emergent ideas sourced from the first 2 elements above

• **Reframing** of these ideas within the context of the study – it’s purpose, the theoretical influences, the research questions, its methodology

• **Highlighting** of emergent key points as the study progresses

• **Validation** and checking of the emergent ideas with the literature, the theories, the methodology as well as emerging knowledge that can influence the study
How the Subjects Come to know (see Marawi Excerpt)

• ‘Living-through’ the process of becoming a female OFW in Taiwan who works in manufacturing.
• Identifying key differences about self, near-others (other OFWs), transnational-others (migrant workers from other countries) and resident-others (the Taiwanese, identified according to their varying impact on the OFW in question)
• Finding role models and mimicking behaviours, attitudes and positions that ‘work’ for coping, surviving and thriving from their specific Minoritarian condition
• Taking part in activities including social interactions online and offline held especially in interstitial spaces to ‘practice’ and eventually ‘own’ adapted socio-cultural elements ascribed to by the self.
• Asserting ‘new self’ in discourse and through action and decisions taken including at work.
• Reflecting and declaring said positions as ‘new self’ to others and through continued conscious mode of behaviour that aligns with subject’s idea of her new self. ‘New self’ overtime becomes who/what the subject knows the self as and is known as by others. This doesn’t mean however that the subject becomes static as she is always exposed to conditions, risks and challenges that require new ‘self-invention/modification’ to survive (i.e. expertise knowledge, language skills, change in bosses and the work environment, etc.).
Issues, Limitations, Challenges

• Researcher’s methodology skills/expertise is limited
• Opportunities to verify subjects claims in discourse are limited
• Where webnography allows for access to the subjects, ‘real life’ immersion is limited to a 3-week scheduled fieldwork for the traditional ethnography element as Taiwan is quite far from current location of the researcher
• Limited window of internet access by subjects on appointed interviews/sessions as the subjects are always pressed for time
• Challenges in immersing self in subject workplaces due to research restrictions of some employers
• Politics colouring cooperation with key official agencies (both Taiwanese and Filipino)
• Resources (financial and temporal) as researcher is limited as researcher is a working student self-financing studies

Addressing Issues
• making personal arrangements to fix ‘resources’ issue
• making ‘reflexivity’ second nature
• use of Geertz’s ‘deep hanging out’ + full deployment of researcher’s expertise of Filipino & OFW culture and practices in active 24-7 digital interstitial as well as ‘third spaces’
• a conscious expansion of possible third spaces outside workplaces and being aware of how they can be far more comprehensively utilized for the study
Resources

References


Images


Slide 3 – Adverts sourced from Jobs.com.ph for 2017 to 2018 vacancies.


Slide 9 – image courtesy of ABS-CBN from their October 2017 coverage of Marawi Conflict.