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Bridging Recruitment to Reintegration in
Migration Governance

LEVERAGING INDIGENOUS APPROACHES FOR STRENGTHENING MIGRATION DATA COLLECTION AND MANAGEMENT

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by Michelle G. Ong, Ph.D.



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by **Michelle G. Ong, Ph.D.**

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01

WHY INDIGENOUS APPROACHES?





Photo: UN Women/Pornvit Visitoran

For migration governance to succeed in enabling migrant workers to reap the benefits of human mobility, the collection of relevant and reliable information on migration is paramount.

Such information is expected to be used by various government agencies for policy-making, planning and programming, service delivery, and their evaluation. Currently, the data collected is mainly of a quantitative nature, following established conventions on data collection and use that have been implemented in businesses and governments globally. Quantitative data on migrant Filipinos, including Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) as a subset of them, provide a large-scale view of the state of migrant workers—their numbers, where they go to work, how much they remit home, and so on. Gender and Development (GAD) policy enshrined in the Magna Carta of Women requires data disaggregation by sex, and most offices collect information that is specific to their mandate; for example, the Department of Justice (DOJ) collects information on the status of cases filed by and against migrant workers and/or recruiters, while the Department of Health (DOH) collects information on HIV status of OFWs to track the number of cases among them (Parreño, 2022a).

While these existing data collection and management practices already produce valuable data, indigenous approaches may offer an important addition to the research toolkit of government and non-government agencies and actors. Indigenous methods can complement existing ones by providing an additional set of perspectives and tools for understanding migration and migration services. These alternative ways of asking questions and collecting data can provide more nuanced insights that complement the large amounts of quantitative data already being collected using various forms, intake sheets, and surveys. They can also be more useful for understanding experiences or phenomena that are not easily examined through these means. For example, a survey might capture what a migrant worker's expressed reasons for wanting to work abroad is but will not be able to show how these reasons are connected, how they build upon each other, how they can be in conflict, and how there may also be unexpressed or unarticulated reasons that are not merely relevant to the individual but could also have broader implications in decision- and policy-making.

IN THE PHILIPPINES,

Sikolohiyang Pilipino has been at the forefront of developing a psychological science that is borne of the Filipino experience, thought, and orientation since its conceptualization in the 1970s (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). It is simultaneously a commentary on and an alternative to how the social sciences, particularly psychology, remained Western and colonial in their orientation. An important part of the growth of Sikolohiyang Pilipino is the development of locally derived concepts, theories, methodologies and methods for collecting data. This policy brief proposes some ways that the indigenous knowledge and approaches developed by Sikolohiyang Pilipino can be useful for migration data collection and management.



02

WHAT COUNTS AS RELEVANT DATA?





Photo: UN Women/Pornvit Visitoran



SIKOLOHIYANG PILIPINO

Sikolohiyang Pilipino is a field of study and advocacy that invites interest from researchers and academics from different disciplines and from practitioners working in various areas. It has been, and continues to be, a rich source of ideas about Filipino values, behavior, and experiences. For example, the concept of *kapwa* (a shared sense of self) (Enriquez, 1978) has been found to be useful in many studies on Filipino values, relationships, and social behavior.



GINHAWA

For migrants and migration services, the concept of *ginhawa* (Paz, 2008), well-studied from an anthropological, linguistic, historical, and clinical perspective, appears promising. *Ginhawa* refers to a sense of *gaan* (lightness, ease) and *gana* (interest, zest) for life. It is understood to be the outcome of good relationships between oneself and one's environment, with the community, family, and God. It is thought that *ginhawa* cannot be had at the expense of one's *kapwa* (fellow human being, one with whom one has a shared sense of self).



Ginhawa is considered to be more than just economic well-being and more than an absence of problems or challenges in life. It is possible to have some *ginhawa* when one has a sense of being capable or having the resources (not just financial but also social and emotional) to deal with one's problems. Notably, *ginhawa* is among the key aspirations enunciated by Filipinos in the collective long-term vision compiled by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) after extensive consultations. Contained in the resulting document, *Ambisyon Natin 2040*, is their longing for a “*matatag, maginhawa, at panatag na buhay.*”



Looking at the large volumes of data collected in order to ensure that migration programs are responsive to the needs of migrants, is it possible to see whether *ginhawa* is being achieved for migrant workers, bringing them closer to achieving this collective goal?



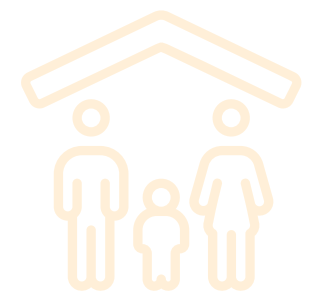
Collecting data for measuring and strengthening *ginhawa* can be fruitful if we consider the different meanings of the concept and its significance for individuals and their families, and what working on improving one's *ginhawa* can entail. Important to include, for example, are the intersectional identities which result in multiple resources and sources of vulnerability for each individual migrant. Although some data routinely collected is already disaggregated based on sex, not a lot of data is disaggregated based on age, and data on religious affiliation, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sexual characteristics (SOGIESC), disability, length of stay abroad, and number of contracts completed are seldom collected.



Data on various services, programs or resources available to migrants from government agencies, civil society organizations or community organizations do not yet appear to be collected systematically to create a common or shared database for ease of referral. A recently concluded mapping of reintegration programs found that they leaned towards ensuring economic reintegration but there were not as many social and psychosocial reintegration programs (Parreño, 2022b).



A broader view of migrants' needs, one that is based on *ginhawa*, can mean paying greater attention to the differences among migrants (including but also beyond gender), the different needs they may have because of their different contexts, and ensuring that the appropriate services are accessible to the most vulnerable.



03

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF INDIGENOUS APPROACHES TO RESEARCH?





Photo: UN Women/Pornvit Visitoran



One of the earliest outputs of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* is ***maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik*** (Santiago & Enriquez, 1976)—a methodology for the conduct of ethical research in the Filipino context that emphasizes acknowledging and minimizing the power difference between the researcher and participants, making sure that the outcome benefits marginalized Filipinos, and that the research experience is a positive and empowering one for all those involved.



Several research methods have been developed over the last few decades, each with its own unique strengths and weaknesses. There are some commonalities or themes to these methods:

FIRST

They are qualitative in nature. They are of greatest use for researching topics or problems that are novel, not well-studied, or about difficult-to-reach subgroups. These methods are good for collecting data on how people make sense of themselves and their world, using their own language.



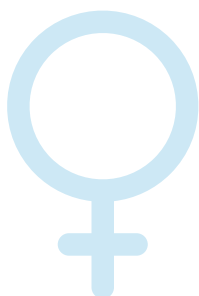
SECOND

Because the methods are derived from the local culture, participants tend to perceive the process as enjoyable and comfortable and the topics as interesting and relevant.

Generally speaking, data collection is done through processes that are familiar to them and that fit relatively easily into their daily lives.

THIRD

The methods are very flexible: they can be used for collecting data from individuals or groups, for sensitive topics as well as not-so-sensitive ones, and they can accommodate participants' own interests and questions that the researcher may not have considered.

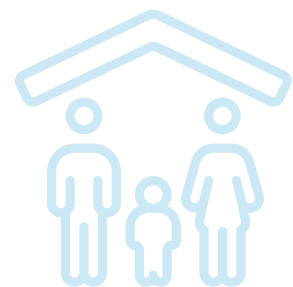


FOURTH

***Maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik* employs a participatory approach**, which allows the participants to feel valued, heard, and empowered. The research findings can also be found to have greater relevance to and resonance with the participants' communities. Validation sessions (where initial results are presented to participants and/or their communities and possibly other stakeholders) is a common feature, especially when it is important for the researcher to capture participants' experiences and understanding accurately.

These qualities make *maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik* and the various methods available suitable for studying some of the questions related to Filipino migration and migration services. For example, differences in how migrant Filipinos themselves, their families, and government agencies define "success" or "*ginhawa*" can be helpful for aligning services with the needs of OFWs. They can provide valuable insight into what concerns certain subgroups, say, older Filipino migrants, have for their future that can inform reintegration programs.

Additionally, data management that accommodates *maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik* must include data-sharing mechanisms to ensure that findings are accessible to those whose services and/or operations will be improved by using them, while also protecting the identities of the participants.



04

WHAT MAY BE THE CHALLENGES & LIMITATIONS OF USING INDIGENOUS APPROACHES?

While *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* has been in development for over 50 years, its main tenets and methodologies remain unfamiliar to most researchers, especially to those outside the field of psychology. The unfamiliarity can mean that while the ideas resonate with those who want to use these methodologies and methods, they can encounter difficulties applying them and enjoying optimal benefit from what these methodologies and methods offer. More crucially, unskilled users who cannot find competent guidance may feel intimidated, unsure, and arrive at results that are not useful to them.

Related to this issue is securing support from superiors, decision-makers, and other stakeholders to conduct research using indigenous approaches. Those who are unfamiliar with them may need to be convinced of the potential of such approaches to offer insights that previous approaches have not been able to produce, or to enable complementary analysis that enhances the contributions of more conventional means of research (e.g., quantitative) about labor migration.



Photo: UN Women/Piyavit Thongsa-Ard

RECOMMENDATIONS



EXPLORE LOCALLY DEVELOPED CONCEPTS

such as *ginhawa* to see whether they can provide a new or complementary framework for migration services, for which other data may need to be collected.



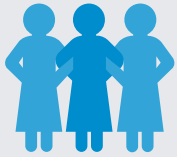
EXPLORE THE UTILITY of *maka-Pilipinong pananaliksik*, and similar approaches in other countries, and the various methods for data collection already developed, with the guidance of experts who can help with a data collection plan that fits the purpose and resource capacity of the organization.



SUPPORT AND PROMOTE EFFORTS by civil society organizations (CSO), local government units (LGU), and other agencies to conduct research using indigenous approaches, and share findings that improve their capacity to help migrant workers.



PUBLICIZE DATA about the situation of migrant workers and migration services offered and accessed by various agencies, CSOs, and LGUs in a format and language that is most accessible to migrant workers and their families.



PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES for migrant workers, their families, and other stakeholders to discuss information on migrant workers and migration services, offer them a venue to make sense of or even question data that is relevant to them, and provide timely feedback on the data, the research process, and potential implications of the findings on their lives and situation.

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Michelle G. Ong is a faculty member of the University of the Philippines Diliman College of Social Sciences and Philosophy's Department of Psychology. Her research contributes to studies on Filipino labor migration and diaspora, with a particular focus on the nexus of migration and aging. In her work she applies a critical, gendered lens and Sikolohiyang Pilipino's concepts, theories, and methods.

