

The Cultural Worldview of Filipinos through Philippine-English Proverbs

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Abstract

Proverbs are linguistic expressions of cultural truths about people's values and beliefs handed down from generation to generation. Thus, for cross-cultural communicative competence and effective social interactions with Filipinos, understanding their proverbs would be essential for those working or interacting with Filipinos. This study investigated Filipino proverbs written in the Philippine English language to find the most prevalent proverb themes or topics that reflect the Filipino cultural worldview. The data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively, using content analysis. The quantitative results showed that Filipinos tend to believe in Heaven, Life and Death, and Evil, respectively. The proverbs also depicted the robust worth of family relations and friendships. Qualitative results showed that some Filipino proverbs have corresponding ones in British English whereas a number of them do not, for they have culture-specific denotations and/or connotations. Additionally, reconsidering the genres or topics of certain proverbs was recommended. The findings also led to implications to teaching English as an International Language, a Lingua Franca, or a Foreign Language, including cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: worldview, Philippines, Filipino, proverbs, culture

1. Introduction

The Republic of the Philippines or the Philippines is renowned for its overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) who work in various fields, including teaching English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). These workers earn a significant volume of income from overseas, with the country receiving 18.7 billion US dollars, 2.4 billion US dollars of which is from the Asian region, as reported in the Annual Report of 2010. The income earned by OFWs has increased annually since the formation of the U.S.-Philippines Partnership for Growth in 2012. Currently, the Philippines' income primarily comes from services and manufacturing goods rather than primary agriculture (Czachorska-Jones 2019).

Although OFWs may be able to adapt to a new culture, they cannot entirely detach themselves from their own identity and upbringing. As the English saying goes, you can take the girl out of the country, but you cannot take the country out of the girl. Additionally, "most of our cultural wealth of a community is stored in its language: their philosophy of life, their stories, their medicinal practices." (Mariacre 2018, p. 232). Therefore, for effective communication and successful businesses, anyone interacting with Filipinos can benefit from understanding their cultural background and worldview, reflected through proverbs.

Proverbs are commonly referred to as "potted wisdom" (Batubalani, 2001, p.1) that provide a glimpse into the values, beliefs, and traditional views of a culture (Mariacre, 2018). As such, they can reveal the specifics of a society's culture and influence cultural behaviors, including personal interpretations and preferences (Boggs, 2022). Failure to understand a culture's worldview can lead to an unbalanced view of that culture, resulting in communication barriers and misunderstandings (Ram, 2020).

For instance, the Philippine-English proverb It is easier to close a river than to stop gossip (Batubalani, 2001, p.9) suggests that Filipinos tend to gossip often, while the comparison of a human's step with that of a carabao in the proverb If a carabao with its four feet makes a wrong step, how much more man (Eugenio & Damiana, 2007, p.342) implies that human errors are ordinary in Filipino culture.

To date, there has been a lack of studies on the worldview of Filipino culture reflected through proverbs. Hence, this study aims to investigate the Filipino worldview of communication and interactions through Filipino proverbs written in English. In addition to providing insights into the unspoken aspects of Filipino culture, the study explores how the English language is used and validated through Filipino proverbs. It also examines the similarities and differences between Filipino proverbs and their English/British counterparts. The findings of this study should be beneficial for OFWs and those who interact or work with them.

The study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What is the most prevalent topic in Philippine-English proverbs? (2) What do Philippine-English proverbs mostly represent, and in what ways?

2. Literature Review

2.1 *The Republic of the Philippines*

The Republic of the Philippines, known as the Philippines or *Republiká ng Pilipinas* in the Tagalog language, was one of the founding members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The Philippines is the only predominantly Christian nation within the ASEAN, shaped by Western influences introduced during more than 300 years of Spanish colonization and subsequent American rule. With over 182 ethnolinguistic groups and 120 spoken languages, it is also the most linguistically diverse country in the ASEAN region. As a result, the culture of the Philippines reflects a blend of both Eastern and Western worldviews. The country's adoption of Catholicism and strong family ties can be attributed to Spanish influence, while American colonial rule brought political and educational systems. The 1987 constitution of the Republic of the Philippines declared Tagalog (or Filipino) and English are the official languages. Currently, more than 10 percent of the population of the Republic of the Philippines are OFWs (San Juan, 2009), facing numerous challenges such as communication, cultural adjustment, and work environment issues (Bautista & Tamayo, 2020).

2.2 *Worldview*

Worldview refers to an all-encompassing understanding of the world, including perceptions, beliefs, and values. Many scholars (e.g., Mendelson, 1968; Goldmann, 1987) have considered it a representation of individual cognitive framework for interpreting and evaluating their surroundings. A worldview can be shaped by their cultural environment, encompassing the collective views, ideas, and values prevalent within their society. In essence, a worldview shapes trajectories in life and influences the direction of human social order. Therefore, an exploration of worldview involves an examination of individuals' attitudes and feelings, informed by their personal experiences and cultural upbringing.

2.3 *Low-context vs High-context Cultures*

For communication, in low-context cultures comprising those of most western European countries, Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, the essentials in the message are favored. In contrast, in high-context cultures consisting of most other Eastern and South American cultures, a relationship is prioritized (Hall, 1959, 1976), and detailed background of the message is indispensable. Therefore, interacting with people from diverse cultural backgrounds can lead to challenges or conflicts, including conflict management (Harr & Krahé, 2016) in the workplace and elsewhere. Accordingly, studying the worldviews of bicultural peoples, like those in the Republic of the Philippines, who possess both domestic Eastern culture and Western culture via colonization and who tend to join overseas workforces, is worthy of efficient communication and thriving business transactions.

2.4 *Previous Studies on Worldviews*

Up to now, few studies on the worldviews of folk beliefs, wisdom, and culture have been published in online research databases. Previously conducted research articles on the worldviews displayed in online databases include Cedar (2004, 2008), Kongsirirat (2014), and Mahamontri (2014), as demonstrated below.

For the use of language, it is usual to witness non-native speakers of English producing a clausal proverb or idiomatic expression in English, which is translated from their first language (Cedar, 2004). For instance, a word-for-word translation of a Thai proverb - *chang taay thang tua ua bai bua pit mai mid*: elephant-dies-all over-use-leaf-lotus-cover-not-all – may result in "When an elephant dies, you cannot use a lotus leaf to cover it up." In effect, the translation reflects Thai people's worldview of their lives and the world around them. The literal meaning of the aforementioned proverb is "You cannot hide a dead elephant with a lotus leaf," which is semantically equivalent to the English proverb - "A guilty conscience needs no accuser." In addition, judgments of translatability of Thai idioms culturally and semantically similar to English idioms tend to be correct, while those of Thai-English idiom counterparts with diverse word meanings and structures are susceptible to be erroneous (Cedar, 2008).

Kongsirirat (2014) investigated Laotian worldviews of leaders or rulers via Laotian proverbs published in the Lao language. The qualitative results indicated that the Laotian worldview flamboyantly mirrors the amalgamation of Laotian tradition called Heet-korng and governing and political backgrounds. Explicitly, Laotian people preferred to obligatorily have just one supreme leader who is righteous, talented, generous, ethical, kind to, and grateful for his people. He should also be equipped with leadership qualities and concerned more for his people's benefits than his own. Moreover, a leader must be approved by his own family and surrounding people.

In Mahamontri (2014), a qualitative study was conducted on 80 Thai proverb idioms to investigate Thai cultural attitudes toward the characteristics of Thai women. The analysis revealed three main categories of social statuses for Thai women: daughter, wife, and mother, as indicated by the proverbs studied. Traditionally, a daughter was expected to be a virtuous, beautiful, obedient virgin, and a skilled cook. A wife was expected to be tidy, loyal, obedient to her husband, supportive, and capable of managing the household and finances. As a mother, a woman was required to raise and educate her children. However, in contemporary times, good cooking and marriage are no longer mandatory for Thai women, but physical attractiveness and sex appeal have become more valued. In summary, the previous studies mentioned above have revealed that the messages in proverbs can represent a distinctive worldview of the populace in a particular society.

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3. Method

3.1 Research Instrument

The theoretical frameworks of worldview and low-context vs high-context were used as an apparatus for data analysis in this study (See sections 2.2 and 2.3).

3.2 Research Procedure

Data used in this study were Philippine-English proverbs, which refer to Filipino proverbs written in English, from the Book of Proverbs & Sayings compiled and edited by A.M. Batubalani (2001). The dataset consisted of 1,031 proverbs, classified into three categories: 33 famous Filipino proverbs, 212 proverbs for various occasions, and 786 proverbs from the Bible. The inclusion of these different types of proverbs enabled a comprehensive analysis of the Filipino worldview, as represented in various aspects of life. In fact, proverbs and sayings have almost identical meanings as defined by some lexicographers and researchers (Mariacre 2018, p. 235); however, only the term proverb is used in this study from now on.

3.3 Data Analysis

As all the proverbs were grouped according to topics and categories set by the book's editor and a proverb can be grouped into more than one category or topic by reason of its morphological structure and semantic structure, all proverbs in each topic were rechecked for validity. After the proverbs in each category were verified, the number of proverbs in each category was calculated and quantitatively analyzed to find the most prevalent topics in Philippine-English proverbs. In addition, the proverbs relevant to communication and social connections underwent qualitative analysis. The two authors analyzed the data quantitatively and qualitatively concerning the cultural worldview, utilizing a content analysis to categorize proverbs and uncover Filipino cultural worldviews through them.

One of the authors gained knowledge of Applied Linguistics and conducted research studies on idiomatic expressions, such as proverbs, that reflect both Eastern and Western cultures. Additionally, she has gained direct experience in both Eastern and Western cultures through graduate studies and living and working in Thailand and the United States of America. The other author acquired knowledge of Eastern and Western literary works, including proverbs and folklore, through living, studying, and researching in Thailand and the Republic of the Philippines.

For validity and reliability, the study also requested three Filipino-born experts working abroad to verify the data analysis and results. The results agreed upon in the consensus are displayed.

To preserve Philippine English, the proverbs cited in this study are presented in their original forms of grammar and spelling, along with their corresponding reference numbers.

4. Results and Discussion

The results are divided into two sections: quantitative and qualitative results and discussion as demonstrated below.

4.1 Quantitative Results and Discussion

Apropos Proverbs of Various Occasions, which is the first section of the Book of Filipino Proverbs & Sayings, sixty-seven proverbs akin Praising the Almighty God and Other Related Topics, pertinent to religious or spiritual beliefs, are divided into nine topics: Praising the Almighty God, Heaven, Spirit, Earth, Evil, Life and Death, Prayer, Sin, and Son of Heaven. The percentages of proverbs found in each topic are demonstrated in the graph below.

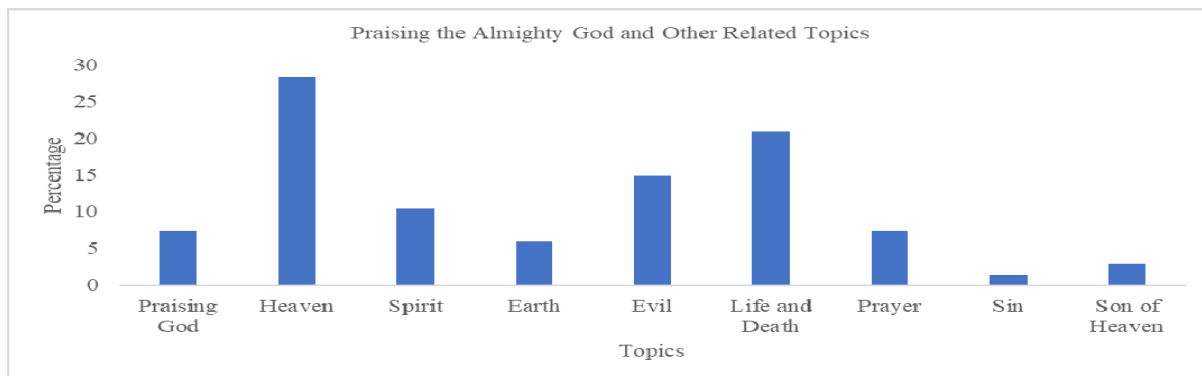


Figure 1. The percentages of proverbs listed in categories of Praising

As shown in Figure 1 above, the majority of the proverbs in Praising the Almighty God and Other Related Topics are in three topics: Heaven (28.36%), Life and death (20.90%), and Evil (14.93%). These conceivably infer that Filipinos believe in life after death, so Heaven is their ultimate desire after death. Hence, they tend to warn themselves and their loved ones while alive to avoid malicious or evil conducts via proverbs, e.g., To walk in the path of virtue for ten years is not enough; to do evil for a single day is too much (36) and Good deeds are not known out of doors; evil deeds are known a thousand miles away (39). Peculiarly, only one proverb is in the list of the Sin topic, i.e., Sin is the root of sorrow (64), even though the highest number of Filipinos are Christians, who are supposed to view Sin as one of the most significant doctrines owing to its standpoint of redemption in Christ. Nevertheless, it is probable that the third most popular topic of Filipino proverbs depicts proverbs comprising some meaning similar to Sin signified by Evil. Thus, in this study, it is suggested that the topic of Sin be combined with the topic of Evil.

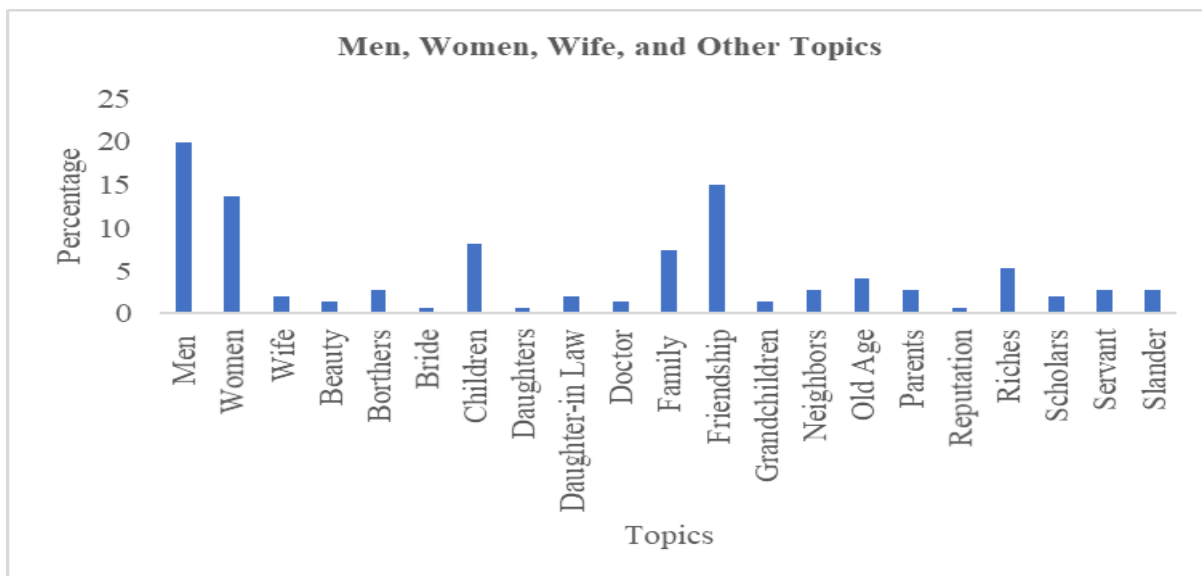


Figure 2. The percentages of proverbs listed in topics of Men, Women, Wife, and other topics

Results in Figure 2 above perceptibly illustrate a person’s roles and human relationships and show that three out of twenty-one topics consist of approximately half of all the 146 Filipino proverbs in this category, i.e., Men (19.86%), Friendship (15.07%), and Women (13.70%). This finding gives the impression of sex segregation in respect of roles, duties, and responsibilities as exemplified in the following proverbs:

For men:

Man sees the gain, not the danger. (80)

He who rides in the chair is a man; he who carries the chair is also a man. (82)

A wise man makes his own decisions; an ignorant man follows public opinion. (90)

Men must be sharpened by men; the knife must be ground on the stone. (92) (Please note that the word "stone" in the previous sentence may have been misspelled as "store.")

For women:

The pretty woman in the house is the enemy of all the ugly ones. (96)

She who is the wife of one man cannot eat the rice of two. (99)

A wife is sought for her virtue, a concubine for her beauty. (103)

Beauty does not ensnare men. (111)

Friendship:

Make friendship with men better than yourself; better none than those like yourself. (155)

The friendship of officials is as thin as paper. (164)

When you have money and wine, you have many friends. (163)

It is difficult to win a friend in a year; it is easy to offend one in an hour. (167)

Furthermore, the results also show the largest number of proverbs related to family, close or extended, as verified via the topic terms: wife, brothers, children, daughters, daughter-in-law, grandchildren, parents, and family. This finding reveals that Filipinos value family and family members to a large extent.

Unexpectedly, the topic of Reputation has only one proverb: When the leopard dies, he leaves his skin; a man, his reputation. Consequently, it is recommended in this study that the proverb should be listed in the topic of Men and the topic of Reputation should be removed. Likewise, the two proverbs in the Beauty topic can be recategorized because the term beauty is not related to human relationships, and one of the two proverbs Beautiful or not, it is my native land, a relative or not, he is a fellow country man (119) may be listed in the Friendship topic while the other proverb The pretty woman in the house is the enemy of all the ugly ones (120) is already set in the Women topic (proverb 96). Accordingly, this study proposes the removal of the Beauty topic from the list of topics.

4.2 Qualitative Results and Discussion

Intriguingly, in the Proverbs for Various Occasions, the mainstream of Philippine-English proverbs falls into the relationship category (146 out of 212). Certain proverbs that reflect the strength of family affiliation include the following:

Brothers are like hands and feet. (121)

To beat a tiger one must have a brother's help. (123)

If the family lives in harmony, all affairs will prosper. (145)

The three proverbs shown above suggest the necessity of family to help do all errands, duties, and even hard work. Similarly, friendship is highly admired as revealed in the following examples.

A well-known friend is a treasure. (156)

Good friends settle their accounts speedily. (159)

When men are really friends, then even water is sweet. (161)

It is difficult to win a friend in a year; it is easy to offend one in an hour. (167)

With clothes the new are best; with friends the old are best. (169)

A long road tests a horse, long-drawn-out affairs test a friend, (170)

The proverbs mentioned above displayed high benefits and values of friendship, like fortune, in both work and interaction. So, for a successful business, it is imperative to work with good friends (156, 159, 161). In addition, maintaining friendships is mandatory for effective communication (161, 167, 169, 170). These proverbs go in line with the English proverb – It's not what you know, but who you know. Remarkably, out of all the proverbs listed in the Philippine-English proverb list, only one is identical to a British proverb - Like mistress, like maid

(110). It is likely that the people of the Republic of the Philippines inherently adopt this proverb as they have been serving as maids or service staff to those western powerful organizations and individuals while communicating with the English language they acquire as a second language and an official one.

Aside from the significance of friendship, retaining friendship is highly regarded, as the following proverbs state:

Make friendships with men better than yourself; better none than those like yourself. (155)

One's acquaintances may fill the empire, but one's real friends can be but few. (157)

If you drink with a friend, a thousand cups are too few; if you argue with a man, half a sentence is too much. (160)

Mutual confidence is the pillar of friendship. (162)

If friends have faith in each other, life and death are of no consequence. (174)

Friends should have a high wall between them. (166)

As presented in the above proverbs, Filipinos have advocated valuing friends more than themselves, treating friends nicely (155, 157, 160, 162), and believing in the strength of true friendship (174). To have faith in friends (174) is in congruence with the English proverbs – Some friendships do not last, but some friends are more loyal than brothers and a friend at hand is better than a relative at a distance. Proverb 166 advises that one should respect a friend's rights and privacy, and maintain appropriate boundaries. This is in agreement with the English proverb Familiarity breeds contempt, which suggests that excessive familiarity can lead to a loss of respect between people who know each other well. This proverb is in accord with the English proverb – Familiarity breeds contempt, meaning when people know each other too much, they can lose respect for each other. Although keeping a high wall between friends is seen as positive in Filipino and Western cultures in some ways, it may contradict Western culture in other situations. For instance, a high wall may be placed between acquaintances, such as those from work or mutual interest groups, but not between friends.

The third largest category of proverbs, comprising 8 proverbs in total, pertains to affluence. The terms rich and riches are used directly in the proverbs as follows:

If you are rich, you speak the truth; if you are poor, your words are but lies. (194)

The rich add riches to riches; the poor add years to years. (195)

Good wine reddens the face a man; riches excite his heart. (197)

He who could foresee affairs three days in advance would be rich for thousands of years. (201)

The proverbs mentioned above reveal that Filipinos cherish abundance to a great extent as the proverb (194) states that wealth can make something from right to wrong and vice versa. Additionally, it is wonderful to be rich because a rich man can be richer and richer (195), and his life is exciting (197). So, the sooner he anticipates success, the longer the period of prosperity he gains (201). Obviously, this proverb contemplates the benefits of foresight. Despite this focus on affluence, these proverbs stand in contrast to the English proverb A person's riches may ransom their life, but the poor cannot respond to the threatening rebukes, which highlights the potential risks faced by wealthy individuals, including the possibility of being held for ransom or threatened. Similarly, the English proverb The rich knows not who is his friend also highlights the challenges associated with being wealthy.

Remarkably, three Filipino proverbs are susceptible to have semantic congruency with the British proverb Beauty is but skin deep, as follows:

The pretty woman in the house is the enemy of all the ugly ones. (96)

A wife is sought for her virtue, a concubine for her beauty. (103)

Beauty does not ensnare men. (111)

Besides the findings vis-à-vis Proverbs in Various Occasions, the Book of Filipino Proverbs & Sayings also lists 33 famous proverbs of local ethnic groups. These proverbs, which are also written in Philippine English, are liable to contain words referring to native flora and fauna. For example, carabao, a water buffalo, as in the Ilocano proverb The kick of the female carabao is caress to the male, a house lizard as in Do not be like the house lizard, Embracing what you cannot embrace (Pampango proverb), and bamboo as in The bamboo, when just beginning to grow, points straight up to heaven but in maturity, after it has gained its form, it bows down to earth (Tagalog proverb). Notably, these proverbs are culturally specific, as they employ words that are unique to the Philippines, and thus, they have no direct counterparts in English or Western culture.

In addition, local life is also portrayed in the proverbial pearls of wisdom of ordinary fishermen. For instance, A sleeping shrimp is carried away by the current (Tagalog proverb), and It is better to go home and weave a net than to stay on the shore and watch the fish (Ivatan proverb). Sleeping shrimp and weaving a net are commonly known among Filipino fishermen.

Finally, the Book of Proverbs from the Bible is a compilation of 786 moral and religious teachings in the form of sayings and proverbs. Logically, these proverbs principally indicate religious morality, courtesy, and practicality that can be used in life and social transactions. Apart from these forms of wisdom, family relationships and social etiquette are also in focus, which confirms the findings specified in the Proverbs of Various Occasions. Examples are as follows:

Morality, courtesy, and practicality:

Happy is the man who becomes wise – who gains understanding. (32)

Be lazy if you want to; sleep on, but you will go hungry. (529)

If you want to stay out of trouble, be careful what you say. (596)

To conclude, the three proverbs state the importance of understanding, diligence, and speaking with cautions.

Family and relationships:

But a man who commits adultery hasn't any sense. He is just destroying himself. (164)

If you curse your parents, your life will end like a lamp that goes out in the dark. (563)

Better to live on the roof than share the house with a nagging wife. (582)

In summary, these proverbs teach a man to be loyal to his wife, be polite to his parents and avoid having a nagging wife.

Social interactions:

Do not go where evil men go, Do not follow the example of the wicked. (99)

People who do not get along with others are interested only in themselves; they will disagree with what everyone else knows it right. (492)

Do you want to meet an important person? Take him a gift and it will be easy. (507)

The above proverbs confer people's behaviors, whom to follow, and how to win an important person.

Consequently, the results, both quantitative and qualitative, significantly indicate the exceptional strength of relationships between family and related people that can lead to either success or failure in life, work, and/or networks of any kind, which is still true in Filipino society nowadays. The Filipinos' bond to family and friends mirrors their native Eastern-culture influence, despite being under westerners' colonization for hundreds of years, points to the fact that a person's native culture often plays a significant role in his worldview no matter where he lives (Mariacre, 2018). According to informal interviews with Filipinos working abroad, Filipinos tend to communicate with their related friends and family, close and distant, with the aid of the internet and social media. Being a new friend to a Filipino is like getting into the networks of his whole family and friends. This depicts that the traditional Filipino cultural worldview is a high context in which personal collaboration and connection are well-defined, more willingly than work and tasks, and thus communication can be implicit with a high context message (Hall, 1959, 1976). In other words, communication with Filipinos may require the skill of reading between the lines. In addition, the proverbs concerning the value of wealth imply that Filipinos tend to treasure money and thus prefer to work abroad where they can earn more income. Consequently, conflict management skills (Harr & Krahé, 2016) should be required for OFWs and those working with them.

Additionally, the findings tend to conform to the study by Bautista & Tamayo (2020) in that OFWs have encountered issues regarding communication, life, and work circumstances. Therefore, it is suggested that anyone working with OFWs understand their strong ties with family and friends, let them meet or communicate with their loved ones, or create an event or environment where they can unite with their fellow countrymen or make new friends. Also, professional training or even effective multicultural counseling should be given to employees including OFWs who need low-context communication strategies in order to work more efficiently (Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Wilson, 2016).

Moreover, while some Filipino proverbs may have English equivalents, many Filipino proverbs do not have direct structural counterparts in English, as idioms and proverbs often arise from the unique cultural experiences and values of a particular language or community (Mariacre, 2018). When discussing Filipino proverbs in an

English-speaking context, it may be more productive to focus on explaining the meaning and significance of the proverb rather than trying to find a direct translation or equivalent in English. This can help promote cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

This research explores the Filipino worldview through an analysis of Philippine English proverbs, which serve as a valuable tool for understanding the values and beliefs of a culture. The study reveals that a number of Philippine English proverbs are culturally specific, lacking any structurally corresponding equivalents in British proverbs. However, some proverbs show structural congruence with British counterparts. The findings of this study provide insights into the unique aspects of Filipino culture and contribute to the understanding of cross-cultural communication. Based on the quantitative analysis of the collected data, it was observed that the most prevalent topics in Filipino proverbs indicate a clear sex segregation in terms of roles, duties, and responsibilities. Furthermore, the prevalence of proverbs related to family and kinship suggests that Filipinos prioritize close family ties and interdependence. In addition, the qualitative results also highlight the importance of social connections and support systems in Filipino society.

The results of this study, together with examples of Philippine-English proverbs in their own forms, can be used in teaching English as an International Language, a Lingua Franca, and a Foreign Language, as well as a classroom regarding language and culture of the Republic of the Philippines.

Lastly, further study on OFWs and Filipinos' communication and interaction in real-life situations and work atmospheres should be investigated and compared with their worldview found in this study and any other related literature.

6. Limitations of the Study

It should be noted that this study does not demonstrate all the proverbs listed in the book, and some Filipinos may not use or be familiar with certain proverbs. Additionally, subcultures or ethnicity and home education, as well as individual differences, can also influence people's values and beliefs, thus, not all Filipinos have difficulty adjusting themselves to a new environment.

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