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HayPinas.org

2012

Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/45947/>

MPRA Paper No. 45947, posted 08 Apr 2013 04:27 UTC

Homilies as Knowledge Transfer Platform for Filipino Migrant Workers in Taiwan

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Abstract: Labor migration has become entrenched in underdeveloped countries as a means to address rampant unemployment and to sustain the local economy. In the Philippines, it is estimated that one in ten Filipinos work abroad. With limited sources to address the information needs of widely dispersed Filipino migrant workers, this study explores how the Catholic Church could steward knowledge transfer, specifically through homilies. Under the framework of Symbolic Convergence theory, thematic content analysis is executed on homilies gathered from a Taiwan-based parish. Through close reading of themes from the recorded texts, migrant workers are said to have knowledge requirements based on their roles as: surveyor (of the foreign environment), survivor (of migrant challenges), and savior-returnee (of eventual homecoming). Findings suggest that homilies provide pragmatic, non-sectarian information. This exploratory study proposes that the church setting could host knowledge transfers for Filipino migrant workers.

Keywords: Knowledge transfer, social communication, migrant labor, symbolic convergence

1. Introduction

Labor migration as the Philippines' primary export has been a sordid reality for more than 35 years. The government's direct hand in encouraging the exodus of Filipinos to work in foreign countries traces back to a program launched by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1974 (Morada, 2001). Latest figures put around 8.5 million Filipinos – roughly 10 percent of the population and 25 percent of the workforce – as working abroad (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2010). Each year, one million more join the bandwagon due to lack of local employment and low income opportunities back home. The majority are women, who are mainly deployed in factories and domestic help. Velasco (2002) laments the situation because “they routinely experience sexual harassment, violation of employment contracts, and other forms of abuse, but often they just suffer in silence” (p. 133).

Migration as a concern for pastoral care has long been acknowledged by the Catholic Church, with the late Pope John Paul II declaring in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (1981) that “every possible effort should be made to ensure that it may bring benefit to the emigrant's personal, family and social life, both for the country to which he goes and the country which he leaves” (p. 48). Blume (2002), speaking for the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, reiterated that the Catholic Church advocates for the dignity, solidarity, and common good of migrant

communities and enjoins governments to provide them with equal rights. Indeed, the Catholic Church has served as a refuge from the hostility confronted by migrants. Coming from a predominantly Catholic nation, Filipino migrant workers attend Sunday Masses and other church-sponsored activities not only for reasons of religious devotion but also as a means to socialize with their countrymen (Sills, 2004).

This exploratory research looks at how the Catholic Church serves as an information source and knowledge transfer platform for migrant communities. The study seeks to determine themes and messages pertaining to migrant work conditions that Catholic Church homilies contain, specifically those addressed to Filipino migrant workers. Through the lens of homilies, the study aims to surface insights about church-based social communications that relate to the diaspora of Filipino workers. Inquiry is concentrated on the Sunday English Mass schedule delivered in a Taiwan-based parish attended mostly by the Filipino migrant community.

At the start of the study, the Catholic Church celebrated the 150th year of its evangelization of Taiwan (Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference, 2010). Christians make up a minority at merely 4.5 percent of Taiwanese society (CIA Factbook, 2010). As a host country for labor migration, Taiwan is of special interest because as Sills (2004) noted, it disallows foreign workers from the same labor rights as its citizens and provides limited opportunity for social integration (p. 321). Despite cultural, linguistic and socio-political barriers, Taiwan still ranks among the top country destinations for migrant workers from the Philippines. As of the latest estimates, some 94,283 Filipinos are documented to be employed on the East Asian island (Philippine Overseas Employment Administration, 2010).

2. Literature Review

Existing studies on Philippine labor migration have largely focused on economic and social aspects. Remittances amount to around US\$18 billion in 2010 (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2011), making it the second largest supply of foreign currency in the country. The contributions of Filipino migrant workers to the economy help stabilize the Philippine peso, stimulate consumer spending, and lessen the incidence of poverty, especially in rural areas (Yang & Martinez, 2005). Moreover, money sent back by Filipino migrant workers provides social security to their extended families (Opiniano, 2010). Because of such critical roles played by remittances in Philippine economic development, the government is often criticized as being more concerned with cashing in on short-term gains rather than promoting the welfare of Filipino workers (Weekley, 2004).

Elsewhere in their daily lives abroad, Filipino migrant workers face the constant threat of abuse, violence, and exploitation (Gatmaytan, 1997, Velasco, 2002, and Ayalon, 2009). When the media widely publicized the execution of a Filipina domestic helper in Singapore circa 1995 in a contentious homicide case, Congress reacted by passing Republic Act 8042, which effectively proclaimed that the Philippines would not continue promoting overseas employment as a means to sustain the economy (Ofreneo & Samonte, 2005, p. 3). However, it did not translate to policy. San Juan (2009)

notes, “The role of the Philippine state in perpetuating poverty and aggravating the exploitation of Filipino citizens cannot be discounted” (p. 103). On the other side of the coin, the social costs of migration have also taken its toll on families and communities left behind by migrant workers (Pe-Pua, 2003; Parrenas, 2005).

Before departing for overseas work, the Philippine government requires Filipinos to attend a half-day seminar on general immigration policies and settlement concerns. However, a survey by Del Rosario (2007) proves that this channel is not enough to orient Filipino migrant workers on their rights while in the host country. In learning about their destination countries, the migrant workers would usually turn to their network of more experienced peers or relatives and to formal instruments such as the media. Furthermore, they would usually seek information due to force of circumstance, such as when their legal status is about to expire (Del Rosario, 2007, p. 235). Among the common ground for knowledge networking of Filipino migrants is the Catholic Church. Mateo (2000) describes that Filipino migrants in Japan go to church not only to practice their religion, but also to recreate its vicinity as an imagined town center. Outside of the Mass, they engage in joking around, gossiping, and even sharing information on employment opportunities.

3. Framework

The Filipino migrant workers’ similar experiences of going abroad, assimilating in foreign cultures, and striving for better quality of life bind them in a shared narrative. When they congregate as the majority of parishioners in a specific pastoral community, the pulpit is expected to address them as a social group as supported by priest assignments and diocesan activities. Because of this context, the study refers to insights from the Symbolic Convergence Theory, which proposes that members of a social group share mutual “fantasies” – understood as any future imagining or aspiration – as they form a semblance of community and togetherness (Bormann, 1972). The Catholic Church, as both source and setting of symbolic convergence – or “communion” in the religious sense – is therefore an ideal point of inquiry.

Symbolic Convergence Theory states that a group of people evolve meanings, attitudes, and motives from co-created sense-making of a common experience. A central concept of the theory is rhetorical vision. Bormann (1972) defines it as the “composite drama that catches up large groups of people in a symbolic reality” (p.398). Rhetorical visions are shared among people who are associated in a community. Bormann (1972) further describes rhetorical visions as constructed from fantasies that chain out in various communication contexts, including speaker-audience and face-to-face transactions. Bormann, Cragan and Shields(1996) cite three master analogues that rhetorical visions are based on: righteous, which concerns high morals; social, which concerns relationship-building; and pragmatic, which concerns utilitarian ends. In line with the study’s focus on knowledge transfer, pragmatic rhetorical vision is the main concern, which the trio describes as emphasizing “expediency, practicality, utility, and whatever it takes to get the job done” (1996, p.4).

Change may result from rhetorical visions if it resonates with the community’s interests and aspirations (Griffin, 2006). This suggests that a rhetorical vision offered to and formed

in the group has the potential to motivate and mobilize individual community members into acting on specific goals. Three decades after the groundwork for the theory has been laid out, Bormann, et al. (2001) say: “The appearance of fantasy types in the consciousness of a rhetorical community is evidence that the members have shared fantasies of a certain sort in the past” (p. 278). These fantasies, manifested through narratives told to a group, draw their force from common experiences and in turn shape social knowledge. As qualitative tools, fantasy themes and types are used to analyze recurring ideas with orientations toward similar narrative elements, such as dramatic situations and characters (Olufowote, 2006, p.456).

Homilies are replete with narrative elements that attend not only to religious sensibilities but to specific socio-cultural realities as well, which make it a suitable artifact for thematic analysis. Narratives function as a means to entertain, to educate, and to pass on knowledge (Mitchell, 2005, p.634). As such, narrative elements in homilies are an important mode in transferring information and insights to the community. Narratives are widely viewed as “an enabler of more efficient transfer of tacit knowledge, by virtue of the context-content inter-relationship of stories” (Connell, Klein & Meyer, 2004, p.187) more than formal types of discussion or documentation. Homilies may then be considered as a strategic form of narrative which is told to an intended audience and transmits specific messages using rhetorical devices.

For Wenger, Trayner and de Laat (2011), narratives also characterize the community’s aspirations as formed around a set of topics or challenges. They identify that a community needs identification and engagement to be sustainable, in which case narratives could help guide the community into learning together and into creating a social fabric for relating to each other. However, the focus on collective action leaves not much room for caring about individual identities, which is a standing criticism of the concept. The purpose of knowledge transfer intersects with the Symbolic Convergence Theory in its assertion that content derived from narratives is readily welcomed and better understood when it corresponds to the recipient’s shared beliefs and affiliation with the community.

4. Method

The study employed a qualitative design. Material was based on site visits in a Taiwan-based Catholic parish conducted during the Christian seasons of Advent in 2010 and Lent in 2011. These two periods are commonly regarded as having well-attended Masses due to their religious significance. Selected as the site of the study was a Catholic parish in Taoyuan County, Taiwan, where a Filipino priest presided over the Sunday English Mass schedules. The church was located in an industrial zone consisting of several high-tech manufacturing firms with a significant migrant workforce. The Sunday Masses drew an estimated average of around 700 Filipino migrant workers as church attendees. Data were constructed from analysis of Sunday homilies – or the teachings and sermons by the priest following the biblical readings – delivered across a total of ten weeks.

The homilies were recorded and selectively transcribed (15 minutes each on average, or equivalent in total to 50 pages of recorded text) for thematic content analysis. Consistent with Smith’s (2000) description of the technique, the desired information was extracted by systematically identifying characteristics of the material. First, it was determined whether each

homily (paying close attention to messages and narrative threads) has content that was relevant to the topic of inquiry. Next, using messages as unit of analysis, major themes that emerged from the data were identified and categorized. Finally, extracts from the texts were selected to support and illustrate perceived knowledge transfer messages that were directed to the migrant community. Following the theoretical assertion that meaning resides in the message and not in the speaker (Bormann, et al., 2001), the analysis privileged the inferences made from the homilies in the tradition of interpretative research. Salient features of the homilies as a narrative performance were also described to facilitate and give context to the discussion.

5. Analysis and Discussion

When examined as a knowledge transfer platform, the narrative performance of homilies was designed to be a top-down model, considering its religious context. It followed a one-way exchange with the knowledge carrier (the priest) directly addressing the knowledge recipients (parishioner migrant workers), but without a feedback mechanism. The format proved to be rigid in the sense that the knowledge recipients assumed a passive role because they could not interrupt or ask questions, owing to the nature of the Mass. Interaction was limited to the priest asking the parishioners to repeat after him short slogans or biblical passages. However, the setup allowed for communication to a large group of people with similar concerns and information needs. The setup also satisfied a face-to-face dimension, which was consistent with most effective knowledge transfers (Gowdy, 2006).

Homilies related the gospel readings to the socioeconomic and cultural background of the community, as suggested by the collected text. The transcripts frequently referred to “factory workers” as a dominant audience, who were the primary addressees of information related to transition, labor condition, and the like. The transcripts also revealed that linguistic code-switching between English and Filipino languages occurred during the recital of the homily, especially as the priest recounted stories and anecdotes. This was a notable feature since language is understood to provide a vehicle for engaging the knowledge recipients. This agreed with the proposition that “language is of vital importance in communicating knowledge because it carries the context which allows for meaning and recontextualization” (Renzl, 2007, p.46). Furthermore, cultural nuances in communicating to the intended audiences had been preserved through the use of humor, familiar expression and imagery, and references to the Philippines such as news and current affairs.

The overarching narrative motif that the homilies revolved around was the migrant workers’ adaptation to a different culture and their eventual return to the homeland. This highlighted how the migrant workers’ employment situation, driven by the need to secure their family’s economic future, is contract-based and temporary. Therefore, they should make the most of their work experience and current earning potential, while constantly negotiating their marginalized identities as Filipinos and Catholics in a foreign territory. Challenges faced by the migrant workers, such as being away from their families or doing manual labor despite their education, were framed on the need for them to prepare for their return to their country. A representative statement from the collected texts said:

“Like you, there are many Filipinos who finished college, who are accomplished and skilled, but who decided to work abroad rather than stay put in our home country... In Taiwan, the salary system is per hour – you earn a much higher salary in a month. It is good to have money to pay loans, send your children to school, and invest in business. But with considerable physical absence from your family, how much should the exchange rate be for that? You don’t want to be valued only for your remittances and be treated as ATM machines.”

From the Symbolic Convergence lens, messages are said to be dramatized and organized with the elements of scene, plot, heroes, and villains (Olufowote, 2006, pp. 453-454). Taking cue from this formula, the homilies portrayed Filipino migrants (heroes) as working hard in a foreign land (scene) with the goal of earning money to send to their struggling families back home (plot) while overcoming conflicts from confrontations with bosses or peers and from workplace hazards (villains). To this end, the knowledge transfer themes from the homilies were identified as helping migrant workers toward their goals. Three major knowledge transfer themes emerged from the data set: comparing and contrasting the home and host countries, coping with migrant challenges, and maximizing opportunities from working abroad. From these themes, the following rhetorical visions were drawn: the Filipino migrant worker as “Surveyor”, as “Survivor”, and as “Savior-returnee”. These rhetorical visions were envisaged as the migrant workers’ information-seeking roles, as gleaned from the homilies. The table below describes the practical, non-religious content of the collected homilies.

Table 1. Knowledge Transfer Themes and Messages from the Homilies

| Themes | Sample messages |
|---|--|
| <p>Surveyor: Comparing and contrasting the home and host countries</p> | <p>Key messages explored the differences between social, cultural or physical geographies in the Philippines and in Taiwan. Some examples cited were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Being on time is important in Taiwanese business culture, as exemplified by factory shift policies and fixed transportation schedules. In the Philippines, an agricultural concept of time (“harvest happens twice yearly”) makes people more tolerant of tardiness; □ In Taiwan, the birth rate is among the lowest internationally because couples prioritize careers. This is the reverse of the overpopulation in the Philippines, which supply workers like you to many parts of the world; □ Earthquakes, though mostly mild, happen in Taiwan more often than in the Philippines. Safety precaution and drills must be participated in. |

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Survivor: Coping with migrant challenges</p> | <p>Key messages instructed migrant workers on how to deal with issues or difficulties they encounter while in the host country. Some examples cited were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Abuses by supervisors or employers such as physical harm or refusal to pay overtime are illegal and should be reported to relevant agencies, and also to the parish desk; <input type="checkbox"/> Technology and social media can be used to bridge parenting and marital issues. It is important to establish regular and open communication lines with families left behind; <input type="checkbox"/> Since factories in Taiwan employ workers not only from the Philippines but from other Asian countries as well, it is crucial to cooperate and relate well with peers, especially if sharing dormitories; <input type="checkbox"/> Deportation or forced return is a consequence for inciting violence against another co-worker, getting pregnant or ill while on contract, or neglecting work duties. |
| <p>Savior-returnee: Maximizing opportunities for return</p> | <p>Key messages encouraged migrant workers to get the most out of their work experience and prepare for their future goals. Some examples cited were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Prioritize paying loans from placement fees, and save a portion of the salary, especially overtime pay; <input type="checkbox"/> Invest in livelihood opportunities and not on easily outmoded products, such as electronics and cell phones. Consider putting up a family-run buy-and-sell business or a food stall to grow money earned while abroad; <input type="checkbox"/> Learn and master job skills gained from the work experience and highlight it in next job applications back in the Philippines or in other overseas destinations. |

As mentioned, most of these messages were contained in narrative threads that touched on the Philippine migrant labor situation. As an example, the priest cited an anecdote of how a migrant worker who received a cash bonus immediately wire-transferred the sum to her daughter for paying her school tuition. In another instance, the priest recounted a parishioner who told him that whenever an ambulance passes by, that parishioner would feel agitated and would immediately worry about his parents back home. Such stories may have been employed

to keep the audience engaged, especially since emotional responses such as empathy sustain a sense of community. As Mitchell (2005) describes, “a good story may be simplistic, yet it can illuminate the minds of listeners and drive home an important point” (p. 365). Connecting narratives with personal experiences could make it more forceful, such as in a homily that discussed poverty and asked for reflection:

“Respect should be afforded to each person. Each of you has a different life story. You have families, you have kids that love you and wait for you. Don’t let yourselves be humiliated, exploited, and more so treated as a kind of entertainment [sic].”

These themes paralleled the common labor migration problems identified by Ofreneo and Samonte (2005) such as exploitative work conditions, limited services and assistance to migrant workers, problems on social and cultural adaptation, and income mismanagement (pp. 7-8). However, some information from the homilies was mentioned in fragments or in tangents. If the discussion is not supported and thoroughly threshed out, it may be difficult for the intended audience to translate key messages into actionable information, which is the goal of knowledge transfer. This concern echoed Del Rosario’s (2007) argument: “Information, therefore, is critical to the survival of [Filipino migrant workers] not only in terms of learning and decision-making but also (re)connecting to the world they left behind and community-building in their adopted country” (p. 227). Moreover, prior to hearing the homilies, some information may already be known to the intended audience, such as the grounds for forced return or deportation. In such a case, reinforcement rather than new learning was the takeaway from the encounter.

The objective of knowledge transfer as well as the rhetorical visions of migrant workers as “Surveyor”, “Survivor”, and “Savior-returnee”, may be categorized as pragmatic, as these were “shared by those who seek practical and utilitarian goals” (Olufowote, 2006, p. 457). Messages from the homilies clued Filipino migrant workers on issues ranging from transitioning to a foreign culture to planning for their economic prospects back in the Philippines. If the messages chained out from the pulpit to the intended audience and from the intended audience to their respective social networks, it could lead to more knowledge transfers and sharing in a wider scale. Furthermore, because the homilies provided a chance for migrant workers to be addressed together, it could be said that it has the potential to foster an environment of belongingness and of being connected with a community despite the xenophobia that would confront them once they step out of the church doors.

6. Conclusion

Findings from this exploratory study identified three knowledge transfer themes recurring in homilies that were directed to the Filipino migrant worker community: comparing the host and home countries, dealing with migrant challenges, and maximizing opportunities. Although not generalizable across denominations and settings, the findings suggest that through homilies, the Catholic Church functioned as a platform for the Filipino migrant worker community to learn about the challenges that they are dealing with. The practical, non-sectarian content of homilies instilled on Filipino migrant workers some aspects of how to adjust to a foreign culture.

This could especially benefit new migrants, who could use such information to make sense of their environment. Thematic content that touched on relationship-bridging with the families that the migrant workers left behind also served as reminders for planning their return home. The migrant workers' limited time to legally stay, work and earn money in the host country was underscored in the overarching narrative motif. It may be said that the temporariness of the migrant workers' employment situation could drive them to aspire for a productive return; hence their need for information that would help them arrive at quality decisions.

Insights from this study can be used to direct social pastoral communication planning in parishes that service migrant workers. Because of the top-down model of knowledge transfer in the church setting, there was no social space for questions, clarifications, and airing out of other points of views that could have made the process an interactive one. Considering the limitations of homilies for interactive knowledge exchange, the Catholic Church could spearhead activities for migrant workers outside of the Holy Mass. Although some messages were specific to Filipino migrant workers (such as placement fees paid to Philippine-based employment agencies before securing a work contract), migrant workers in other contexts and of other nationalities could also gain insights from the messages. Due to the limitations of the study, it could not be investigated whether the knowledge transfer themes resulted in concrete actions for the Filipino migrant workers who attended the homilies. Follow-up studies employing both qualitative and quantitative approaches to a similar demographic may be carried out to fill this gap. Future research could repeat the research method in other foreign countries with larger concentrations of migrant workers and more exhaustively describe themes and learning outcomes from homilies.

Among the recognized knowledge transfer activities participated in by Filipino migrant workers are teacher training, sharing of personal experiences, consultancies and investments, and research and development initiatives (Opiniano and Castro, 2006:85). This study argues that attending religious service, specifically Catholic Masses, also yields and reinforces knowledge for Filipino migrant workers.

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