Research Article

To Paint a New Picture: Into the Lives of Eldest Siblings of Separated Families during COVID-19

Daniel Andrei Rabuya, Franz Elloise Moralde, Angel Rose Villacampa, Shane Sagosa, Ravyn Bridget Fernandez, Ralley Kyle Cabrera, Willem Mikkel Cagalitan, Rycel Monique Bendibel, Celeste del Socorro, Flordeliza S. Gagani*

Basic Education Department Senior High School, University of San Carlos, 6000 Cebu City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

This study emerged to enable humanitarian organizations to provide better services for children in separated families by understanding eldest siblings' lived experiences. Through Husserlian's descriptive phenomenology utilizing Colaizzi's method of data analysis, six participants were interviewed online at the height of the pandemic in 2021-2022 in Cebu City, Philippines. Data were transcribed using data reduction methods and revealed 6 themes: (1) "Having to always be the bigger person": *Role Intensification*; (2)"Devoting myself to things that weren't supposed to land on me": Adult *Difficulties*; (3) "Becoming stronger and keeping a soft spot"; *Growing in Stature*; (4) "True brothers are there for you": *The Support Given to the Supporter*; (5) "To be free but mindful:'' *Motivation to Persevere*; (6) "To paint a better picture of life: ''*Setting and Living an Example*. The researchers discovered that the eldest siblings were forced to take charge of responsibilities that were not supposed to be theirs; encountered emotional difficulties such as loneliness and anxiety in facing a wide range of familial, developmental, and logistical problems; coped through these challenges with social support, religious devotion, and modern entertainment; and devoted their lives to protecting their siblings and giving them the lives they deserve. From these results, the researchers recommend that counseling is provided for the eldest siblings to enable the development of support structures and meaningful relationships that propel the eldest siblings to persevere.

Keywords: *Divided Family, Parentification, Phenomenology, Social Support*

Introduction

For parents, separation may be a painful but necessary act to salvage their lives. But for their children, it is an event that sets them on an alternate track of life. Of these children, the eldest sibling and their actions often have the largest impact on the life of their siblings and the heavy responsibilities that await them. In an Asian household like the Philippines, being a firstborn in adolescence is never an excuse; these children must always take accountability for mistakes made by younger siblings, and always remain the "bigger," more mature, and more patient person. First-borns reported a strong pressure to be role models to later-borns, provide sibling care, assume family responsibilities, and not rely on younger siblings (Wu, et al, 2018).

The purpose of this research is to contribute new knowledge for the benefit of entities such as child services and guidance counselors, whether these be in counseling, family law, and mental health advocates; this research allows for improvement in these services, all in the effort to provide care for children and separated families.

This study arises from the research that although the perspective of each child is equally valuable, the grunt of the responsibility to meet the emotional and physical needs of the children rests on the eldest as the natural leader (Amato, 2000). This is also in parallel to the assumption that positive family relationships brought about by the leaders of the struggling family have the potential to aid children and adolescents cope with and adjust to parental divorce as sources of comfort, stability, support, and security in times of familial stress and change, amidst disparities among circumstances.

Additionally, couple separations are still happening in the Philippines despite the absence of formal and legal separation. Fleming (2021) mentioned that in totality, 2.2% of all parents split up; confirming married and cohabiting couples split up at a rate of 1.3% and 5.3% respectively. Considering the number of separated families in the Philippine population, this situation made a massive impact on Filipino children. National studies began to discover certain factors contributing to the adjustment by children; most of the studies focused specifically on parent-child relationships, statistics, conflicts, causes, and effects. However, the role of eldest siblings in promoting better adjustment of younger siblings and upholding parental responsibilities are widely overlooked - a knowledge gap that has significantly driven this study.

Given the fact that the number of annulment and nullity cases filed has been increasing, confusion arises in studying the impact of these scenarios, which fails to view separation as a process that would change life circumstances rather than a single event (Santos, 2016). It is important to look at both family structure and functioning upon understanding the eldest siblings' adjustment to separation.

Thus, this study is anchored on the attachment theory of Bretherton (1992) which emphasizes the idea of changing the way people think about how a child's attachment to his or her mother can be broken by loss, hardship, or separation. Moreover, the theory stressed that the child and parent bonds have an impact on children's physical, psychological, behavioral, and developmental health. Numerous behavioral problems are associated with attachment, such as the need for attention, mistrust, difficulties interpreting relationships, fear of rejection, impulsivity, parental "availability," and trauma. It is then important to note that eldest siblings tend to cope by doing the opposite to their siblings, showing them affection, guidance, and trust in each other to feel united. They may be curious to know if this is the meaning of their lives, to carry the weight of distraught and duty from the separation of both parents' affliction that leads them to lead a role in their lives. Attachment is fundamentally important to child protection. It is usually not the bruise, but the relationship it represents that causes the greater lasting harm (Reese, 2007).

With these, since most of the research that exists about this topic focuses on parent-child relationships and experiences, and there is no readily available source of information about the role of siblings in coping with separated family issues, then this paper addresses the responsibilities of the family that the eldest sibling is burdened with in the times during and following the separation of the eldest siblings'

parents especially during COVID 19 in the Philippines.

Methods

This study aimed to provide an objective analysis of subjective personal experience. Thus, the descriptive phenomenological method of Husserl (1859-1938) was chosen as there are inquiries to be acknowledged with certain experiences that require understanding from the perceptions of the persons involved.

The study was conducted within Metropolitan Cebu City, Philippines. Non-probability, purposive sampling technique was used to select the six participants in this study.

Selection Criteria The criteria in selecting the participants to be included were the following: (1) being the eldest sibling in the family who has experienced parental separation, (2) being of legal age, and (3) residing in Metropolitan Cebu, Philippines. Table 1 presents the participants of the study.

Table 1. Participants of the Study

Participant	Code Name	Age	Sex
1	Beagle	21	M
2	Bottlenose	22	F
3	Sarabi	19	F
4	Malinois	18	F
5	Myna	19	M
6	Aquila	18	M

Data Gathering Procedures

This study used a semi-structured interview schedule, which was checked for credibility and confirmability by experts and cross-examiners such as the adviser, the panelists, and the research coordinator majoring in Research and Evaluation. Data gathered is triangulated using observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. A letter of approval was secured from the offices of the Principal and Research Coordinator before sending the consent forms and informed consent to the participants. Before the interview, the participants were informed of the ethical procedures that they may or may not participate in the interview and that they can withdraw anytime. They were also informed that privacy and confidentiality of the results were given utmost importance and that data would be used for educational purposes only. Hence, the researchers asked permission to record the interview so that accurate information would be transcribed. The interview lasted for almost one hour and they were told to share their perspective as the eldest siblings in separated families, their feelings, reactions to the difficulties and challenges they experienced, their coping mechanisms such as hobbies and motivations, and the meaning of their experiences as eldest

siblings. Moreover, the researchers ensure that bracketing and data saturation were followed during the interview. The researchers decided to end the interview when it reached its data saturation point when there is no longer new data or answers from the participants. The results were also triangulated using focus group discussions by meeting the participants online. The data then was kept in a google drive for safety and security.

Data Analysis

Data was recorded and transcribed using Colaizzi's method of data analysis. Colaizzi's (1978) method of data analysis was employed to generate the themes of the study that capture the lived experiences and their meaning and essence to the lives of the eldest sibling living in separated families (Depakakibo et.al., n.d.). Data were read and re-read and were transcribed through data reduction from verbatim, significant statements, formulated meanings, emergent themes, and final themes. The researchers observed bracketing and suspension of assumptions to minimize biases in reducing the data. The researchers again applied member-checking procedures to ensure the accuracy of the information and to establish

the credibility and trustworthiness of the results since the main instrument of qualitative research is the researcher. The data became saturated as the themes and findings became repetitive, and no further findings could be concluded with the given data.

Table 2. Final Themes of the Study

No.	Themes
1	"Having to always be the bigger person:" *Role Intensification*
2	"Devoting myself to things that weren't supposed to land on me:" *Adult Difficulties*
3	"Becoming stronger and keeping a soft spot:" *Growing in Stature*
4	"True brothers are there for you:" *The Support Given to the Supporter*
5	"To be free but mindful:" *Motivation to Persevere*
6	"To paint a better picture of life:" *Setting and Living an Example*

Theme 1. "Having to always be the bigger person": Role Intensification

The parents' separation sets the eldest child on the path that tasks them with being the "bigger", stronger, more mature person in the family. This is not an assignment given by their parents for their psychological development, but a pressing burden with disturbingly real consequences for the family. Participants Beagle and Myna shared:

"I just kept in mind that this is family – my siblings. Like if there's no other person who will step up to take up the responsibility, the situation worsens." (T1, P1, L 23-26)
"As the eldest, you have to lead your other siblings. That's it, you have to lead and look after them. You need to talk to them about life and how to make decisions." (T5, P30-31, L 1425-1431)

This task is not only for the sake of the younger siblings but also for the struggling parent or parents; as one participant brought to attention:

"We were never given the time to cope with ourselves. It was the parents who were given time to cope. Us kids, we were

Results and Discussion

After the interpretative transcriptions of data from the interview of the participants, the findings revealed six (6) final themes which are as follows:

just told that it's just like that." (T1, P5, L 220-223)

This task of "being the bigger person" is not taken under the watchful guidance of a parent, as is the prominent case in a nuclear family; but is taken alone. Participant Aquila mentioned:

"I disliked the part of being alone; like, you're lonely, and there are times where we are plagued with…issues." (T6, P32, L 1508-1510)

Most of their responsibilities to their siblings were not new, as the participants attested:

"I wouldn't consider it a new responsibility." (T1, P3, L 90-91)
"New responsibilities? I don't think that they are new." (T3, P17, L 786-787)

Rather, it is the lack of help and guidance from parents and the severity of the siblings' problems that the eldest siblings describe as part of their challenges; the intensification of their role. Following the aforementioned lines of participant Beagle:

"I wouldn't consider it a new responsibility. But what changes are that you don't only take care or look out for them, but like

you're guiding them and being a parent for them." (T1, P3, L 90-94)

The first theme contains how the eldest siblings were set on paths where they faced unaccustomed responsibilities of having to always be the bigger person by guiding and leading their younger siblings, developing new responsibilities as the eldest, and the difference of being the eldest sibling. However, most of these responsibilities were not considered new, but are the lack of guidance from parents and the intensity of the siblings' problems that they describe as part of their challenges; the intensification of their role.

Previous studies have found a similar sentimentality of having the eldest siblings as the bigger person in the family — for their siblings. Szymanska (2021) found that from the first moments of life, siblings are constant companions in both positive and negative life events, often becoming the role model, additionally proposing that one sibling, typically the older one tends to serve as a role model as younger children often appear to imitate both adaptive and non-adaptive behaviors. Hence, the participants felt alone and were thrown into responsibilities that far succeeded their previous social development.

Theme 2. *"Devoting myself to things that weren't supposed to land on me:" Adult Difficulties*

Still, there is a thin, but the existing line between intensified responsibilities and new responsibilities for the eldest siblings to undertake. The second theme talks of these latter responsibilities that, "*I knew weren't supposed to land on me.*" (T1, P2, L 51-52).
The new, adult difficulties that the participants most prominently mentioned were regarding financial matters. When asked about their biggest challenges, participants Beagle and Aquila replied:
"Finances. Because it's not all the time that our father supported us, because he's supporting another family." (T1, P2, L 66-68)
"My difficulties would be, first: financial matters." (T6, P33, L 1525-1526)

When Participant Bottlenose was asked about her dislikes, she replied:
"One of the things I dislike is when it comes to money. For example, paying for my tuition and everything." (T2, P8, L 358-360)

However, challenges are not all external, and as participant Beagle mentioned when asked about what is one's greatest responsibility in life:
"A person should take care of themselves first, because if a person can't take care of themselves, then they can't take care of other people. I think that's the obligation people should have." (T1, P6, L 259-263)

The participants mentioned that the emotional and personal challenges they faced were both novel and deeply traumatic. Participant Sarabi narrated:
"The gravity of the mistake felt so big to me that um, it just really would feel heavy... So, um, I'm not a perfectionist but there were times that I would strive to always do my best but there was a cost." (T3, P19, L 893-899)

The participants also attested to being unable to trust people for fear of repeating the trauma inflicted upon them and their siblings. Participant Myna has mentioned this:
"Because of what happened to my family, I have trouble trusting people." (T5, P 28, L 1289-1290)

In a study conducted by Brochet et al. (2020), it was found that when children undertake responsibility for family members outside their cognitive developmental stage, this is recognized as parentification; the responsibilities and routines are widely associated with detrimental consequences, such as depriving children of age-appropriate experiences, pursuits, and care.
The second theme is centered on how the eldest siblings experienced adult difficulties as they devoted themselves to things that were not supposed to land on them, opening chances for challenges to be encountered such as financial difficulties, emotional challenges, family

conflicts, student struggles, as well as the expectations and pressure from other people. The eldest siblings had to manage adult responsibilities in stabilizing the household and navigating through the social world to find friends they could rely upon for matters that had consequences over real lives.

Theme 3. "Becoming stronger and keeping a soft spot:" Growing in Stature

Great wills are forged under the greatest pressure, and the participants attested to the personal growth they experienced; acknowledging that they had become stronger through their unfortunate circumstances. These encompass the findings of the third theme:

> *"There are some who would be weakened by these challenges. But with my siblings, we only became stronger."* attests participant Myna (T5, P28, L 1326-1328)
> *"As time progressed, I realized that it's all about being strong and being well-grounded; whatever challenges you may face, you should never give up"* is what Aquila says they have learned (T6, P 35, L 1661-1665)

Through the loneliness in their services, the financial difficulties, and the personal problems, the participants learned and adapted to their difficult situations to support their families.

> *"Because of what I've gone through, I'd say that I've matured. I now know what one's supposed to do to anticipate the changing times so that when those times come, things won't be as difficult."* (T5, P27, L 1267-1276)

In the third theme, the eldest siblings from separated families experienced respective personal growth by acknowledging the importance of selflessness, strength, and invulnerability, which helped them to persevere and be more mature. They had become stronger through their difficulties and challenges as they persisted in the overall dynamics of life. Howe and Recchia (2014), it was analyzed that sibling relations provide a significant context for the development of siblings upon understanding social, emotional, moral, and cognitive roles as it is a safe and secure area to learn how to interact, manage disagreements, and regulate both positive and negative emotions.

First-born siblings mostly engage in leadership, teaching, caregiving, and helping roles. This is also reflected in the third theme as participant Beagle improved being stronger by being sociable by being a student leader and public speaker; participant Bottlenose tried harder in guiding and supporting the younger siblings; participant Malinois sacrificed their other responsibilities to help their younger siblings. Through their difficulties, the eldest siblings developed to be assertive for the survival of their family, but through this, they kept empathy for their siblings.

Theme 4. "True brothers are there for you:" The Support Given to the Supporter

The people who supported the eldest siblings in enduring these challenges are the findings of the fourth theme. The parents of the participants struggled with dealing with separation and trying to make financial ends meet as the sole parent of their children, and that is why certain responsibilities were left to the eldest siblings. However, this does not necessarily mean that their parents willingly neglected the eldest siblings. Some participants mentioned connections with at least one parent, connections that made them understand the work that both of them had to put in to support the entire family. Participants Bottlenose and Myna attested:

> *"I don't hide my feelings from my mom. She understands when I talk to her she calms me down."* (T2, P11, L 473-475)
> *"I want to care for my mom. Through whatever else happens. That's when I have work. New things will happen to us."* (T5, P30, L 1399-1402)

Meanwhile, participant Aquila mentioned that it was his father who taught him the lesson mentioned above of being, "Strong and well grounded." Grandparents are also a well-mentioned source of support, as participant Beagle and Aquila said:

> *"So right now, our extended family, our grandparents helped support us."* (T1, P2, L 69-70)

"My motivations are my grandparents. Since I live with them, they're basically like parents to me." (T6, P35, L 1623-1625)

It also came out from the interview that these participants received social support from friends especially when these friends understand and listen to them. However, when these friends do not understand them, Malinois just shrugs her shoulder and said:

"Ahh that's fine, it happens to everyone," "That is life," "Blah blah blah." (T4, P24, L 1135-1137)

But when the friends do understand the participants, they feel blessed and treasured. One said:

"I'm very blessed to have friends who know how to deal with me when I tell them my difficulties. They just listen to me and then, they don't try to invalidate my emotions." (T3, P22, L 1036-1041)

Lastly, the siblings of the participants were mentioned as a source of support, with their kinship and shared struggles pushing the participant to persevere.

"If I feel like I can't continue, I'd remember my siblings. One thing I always wanted growing up is for my siblings to grow up with the life they have always deserved." (T1, P4, L 141-144)

The fourth theme in this study revealed that eldest siblings have connections and support from parents, younger siblings, and friends. Eldest siblings mentioned that they had at least one connection with a parent, while others remained on good terms with both parents and received support from extended families – grandparents. Younger siblings served as a source of support, with their shared struggles that pushed the eldest siblings to persevere as it also made their connection stronger and deeper. Lastly, friends became great supporters as they empathize, understand, and motivate the eldest siblings.

In addition, Hogan et al. (2002) articulated that the family, particularly parents, constituted the most important and valued source of support for children. Friends were also an important source of support. For the eldest siblings, some though not all friends and family will eventually prove that their relationships are meaningful and authentic through being there to teach, to listen, and to love.

Theme 5. "To be free but mindful:" Motivation to Persevere

Aside from the social support from friends and family, the participants had certain personal coping mechanisms that helped them process their emotions and to motivate them to continue. Half the participants as something they would turn to cited religion. The church was given as a place to connect with both God and their religious community:

"I got more involved in the church. There were sermons and messages that spoke to me about loving your family." (T2, P11, L 467-478)

The faith that they have embraced provides an avenue for them to deepen their spirituality for them to feel refreshed whenever daily life becomes an abhorrent cycle for them, and to seek the necessary action when feeling confused or lost. Personal prayer was also put as another religious way to deal with the challenges, with Sarabi and Aquila saying:

"I bend to the Lord when I face these kinds of emotions. Um, I read the Bible, I pray, I talk to the Lord." (T3, P20, L 918-920)
"I will always turn to prayer." (T6, P34, L 1592)

Religion gives the participants something stable they can cling to through the turbulence found in their experiences. Another way the participants have mentioned they try to achieve this break and stability is through literally moving out of their busy homes and enjoying the outside world for a while:

"I would go out honestly like I go out because if I go out, they can't ask me questions and that's my coping mechanism." (T2, P10, L 450-452)
"One of my favorite activities is camping, trekking. It's very fun. Enjoying the outdoors, and having peace of mind." (T1, P4, L 166-168)

Lastly, the participants consume entertainment such as anime, drama series, and video games. Participant Myna shared:

"So that's it. I watch basketball as well, or movies, or anything entertaining for me." (T5, P 30, L 1382-1385)

Martinez-Montilla et al. (2016) mentioned that coping mechanisms could potentially strengthen and keep family resources for them to be protected from stressful situations and solve or improve these situations. The fifth theme centralizes how the eldest siblings from separated families were able to find coping mechanisms and motivations as they went through struggles and responsibilities as the eldest. Coping mechanisms such as going out and doing things that make them happy did the participants mention the most.

Moreover, one of the most shared motivations by the eldest siblings was faithfulness to God by listening to mass messages and following God's will, constant communication with Him, and summoning positive reinforcement by praying and taking action. To cope with these challenges, the eldest siblings would lean upon their religious beliefs and communities, taking breaks from their responsibilities with exercise, nature, or digital entertainment.

Theme 6. "To paint a better picture of life:" Setting and Living an Example

With the help of the participants' coping mechanisms and motivations, they were able to identify and acknowledge the meaning of their lives as the eldest siblings. The meanings specified by the participants include: being the parent figure, being the siblings' role model, as well as setting and living as a good example. Participant Aquila strongly vindicates:

"As the eldest, you have to lead your other siblings. That's it, you have to lead and look after them. You need to talk to them about life and how to make decisions." (T5, P30-31, L 1425-1431)

As the eldest sibling, the participants said that they had to act as a parent for their siblings; they had to be the man of the house, the parent figure who guides their siblings in every way. Participant Beagle said:

"I just kept in mind that this is family – my siblings. Like if there's no other person who will step up to take up the responsibility, the situation worsens." (T1, P1, L 23-26)

As the child who gets to learn and experience things first, the eldest siblings also view themselves as someone who needs to be the younger siblings' role models. Participants Bottlenose and Sarabi corroborate:

"Having to always choose to be the bigger person when things happen. You have to be careful how you do things, how you react to things because they can follow it" (T2, P9, L 389-392)

"So I have friends, the old women that you know, um I would remember them telling me that, "You have to be a good sister. You have to be a role model. You have to be like your mom. You have to… and all of that." (T3, P18, L 823-827)

When asked about the highlights of their experiences, participant Bottlenose and Malinois shared:

"I have so many siblings, I have to set an example in everything that I do, may it be how I handle my responsibilities in school. It's like I am setting the standards for most of my siblings because I can't run away from the fact that my siblings will look up to me, so I have to set an example." (T2, P7, L 308-315).

"Perhaps, the biggest obligation I have in life is how to handle myself and my sibling so that we'll both be successful in the future." (T4, P25, L 1149-1152)

The sixth theme encompasses how the eldest siblings identified and acknowledged the meaning of their lives, which are being the parent figure, being the younger siblings' role model, as well as setting and living as a good example. In terms of being the parent figure, the eldest siblings had to be the man of the house, be the father figure, and have the obligation of guiding and helping the family, especially their younger siblings.

The participants view their role as the eldest sibling as someone who needs to set a good

example and standard by not showing weakness, being careful with their actions, and keeping their siblings away from bad influences. Jambon et al. (2018) indicated the importance of the role of older siblings in the lives of their younger siblings that just like parents; they act as role models and teachers, helping their younger siblings learn about the world. The eldest siblings viewed their lives as culminating in what would give and show their siblings success, opportunities, and social support as they continue to live and develop in the world.

Conclusion

Based on the analysis and interpretation of themes, the eldest siblings from a separated family are faced with endeavors of being the "bigger", stronger, and more mature person in the family: a pressing burden that comes with real consequences, which intensify their role as the eldest. Upon fulfilling their role as the eldest siblings, new adult responsibilities were encountered, particularly in financial and emotional challenges, as they had to manage difficulties that were tormenting their growth. Through all these challenges, they were able to become stronger as they learned, coped, and adapted to their difficult situations for them to support the family. Genuine supporters and motivations also helped in facing the challenges such as friends, family members, parents/parents, siblings, and religion. Outlets such as digital gaming and televised entertainment were also instrumental in giving the eldest siblings opportunities to rest. These eldest siblings can acknowledge the meaning of their lives as parent figures, siblings' role models, and good examples; the eldest siblings strive to paint a new picture.

With these results, the researchers recommend counseling for the eldest siblings that would encourage the development of support structures and meaningful relationships, encouraging them to persevere. Academic institutions should also improve the support system and try to develop some instructional activities that enhance the personal, emotional, and spiritual aspects of children especially the eldest from separated families.

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