



Cast no shadow: a phenomenological study of a middle child

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ABSTRACT

Each family member has unique talents, and a solid family unit is built on the bond between siblings and parents. Middle children's lives have historically cast a shadow and been ignored in the family since older siblings are recognized for how they become the people they become. In comparison, younger siblings are recognized for their accomplishments. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of middle children, specifically their struggles, coping mechanisms, and insights. This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative research design; the selected participants were eight middle children of the family. Through thematic analysis using Colaizzi's method, this study gathered all the data from the participants. The study results showed the following themes: unfair treatment in the family as a struggle, relationships between middle children and their peers, and independence as a coping mechanism, while existential validation of the middle children as their insight. This research provides valuable insights that middle children need recognition and appreciation by accepting their unique perspectives and essential role in society and their lives.

Keywords: Middle Child, Birth Order, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

Every part of the family is unique in its capabilities, and siblings' relationship with their parents is the foundation of a strong union. Older siblings are known for how they manage to be the person they become and the youngest for their achievements; in this state, middle children's lives have been a shadow to the family. Middle children are excluded, ignored, or even outright neglected because of their birth order. Some children may have specific personality and relationship characteristics due to being the middle child (Werner, 2023).

Middle children in Qatar frequently experience difficulties in their homes navigating their roles between older and younger siblings, feeling neglected or eclipsed. The inability of middle children to find their position in the family hierarchy causes them to feel insecure and need approval. However, because they are often thrown into the heart of disputes, they usually acquire good negotiating and peacemaking skills (Adler, n.d). All in all, they often perceive themselves as the least preferred child in the family, which causes them to feel resentful of their siblings for being marginalized (Dodgson, 2017).

In the Philippines, the issue of leaving the middle child to feel they have no clear role or status in the family existed. They felt "as if their siblings overshadow them, and with that, they develop characteristics that psychologists call the features of 'Middle Child Syndrome' (Dela Cruz, 2021). The middle child often experiences emotional or psychological detachment from their parents. Due to their position in the birth order, they may need more attention from their parents and siblings, leading to feeling overlooked. They may feel invisible and struggle to find their place within the family. This lack of attention can impact their self-esteem and motivation, challenging thriving (The Freeman, 2014).

Consequently, according to Silvestre (2023), middle children are shown as being disregarded or overlooked by their guardians and parents. Only some studies tackle the middle children in the family, which must be explored and discussed, especially in our locality. The phenomenological experience of being a middle child could be a lack of exploration into the cultural or societal factors that influence this experience.

This study examines the lived experiences of middle children, aiming to illuminate their unique perspectives, challenges, and coping mechanisms. With this study, the middle child in the family lies in recognizing their unique position

and understanding the impact it has on their development and relationships that may benefit the middle child themselves, their siblings and their parents to understand, support, and nurture them by shedding light on the experiences of middle children. Additionally, studying middle children can help challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about birth order, promoting greater awareness and appreciation for the diversity of experiences within families to foster more knowledge about the middle child that can benefit future researchers.

METHODS

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative approach. Specifically, this study used a phenomenological research design method to explore the lived experiences of middle children. It was emphasized in Delve Pricing (2022), as cited by Limpaecher (2022), that phenomenological design aims to focus on the interpretation, characterization, and understanding of the lived experiences of middle children. The participants' personal experiences, challenges, and coping strategies were explored through this method.

Research Participants

The researchers selected the respondents according to the standard of this research, and the participants were eight middle children from different families. This study used a purposive method to select our participants. A purposive sample method was utilized in this study (Vijayamohan, 2023). The criteria for our participants were middle children, 18 years old or older, and who live in Barangay Zone III, Sta. Cruz Davao Del Sur. These participants filled out an informed consent form, and by utilizing labels rather than their names, their identities will also remain anonymous.

Instrument and Analysis

The researchers utilized in-depth interviews to gather participants' data in this research study. The gathered data was analyzed using Colazzi's method (1978), as cited by Morrow et al. (2015). Colazzi's phenomenological data analysis method indicated that it is a detailed and narrative approach from the participants. This method helped us to understand the data gathered from our participants, which involves transcribing various languages into English, specifically the language used by our respondents in this study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggles of the Middle Child in the Family

Middle children are often overlooked or overshadowed by their older and younger siblings. They resemble the air because they can only be felt, not seen. Middle children struggle with favouritism compared to their younger and older siblings. They may compete for attention, affirmation, and acknowledgment within the family dynamic.

Unfair Treatment in the Family

The participants feel that they are not favourites in their families. Often, they feel neglected and overshadowed by their siblings. Middle children experience that their parents are blaming them because of their birth order. Werner (2023) claims that middle children typically do not consider themselves the family's favorite. They frequently believe that their parents give their siblings preference and that the middle children are overlooked. One of the respondents shared her experience: "As a middle child, I feel like I am not the favorite child of my family. Sometimes, there is favouritism between my siblings and me. They give appreciation to my siblings and none for me. Often, at night, I always think that I am not one of them. Because I cannot see the love they give unless my siblings are more attentive" (R1, Page 1, Line 12).

Similarly to our participants, he feels excluded within his family because their birth order is in the family: "Sometimes I feel left behind or overshadowed by my siblings in our family because I have a younger sibling and also my eldest. Usually, the attention that I want to receive from my parents goes to them". (R8, Page 1, Lines 12- 15). This may make them feel less valued or noticed than their siblings. Middle children may be more likely than their elder and younger siblings to feel overlooked, neglected, and overshadowed due to their birth order (Regan, 2021).

Additionally, the respondent added that she feels left behind: "Sometimes I feel that my youngest sibling is our

parents' favourite child. It seems like I am being overshadowed or overlooked. Typically, when there is a small quantity of conflict with my siblings, my parents always defend them." (R4, Page 1, Lines 12). Likewise, other respondents revealed that "it seems that the younger brother is treated differently, so when I was a child, I felt like I was always left out" (R5, Page 1, Lines 13). Thus, the middle child cannot be either parent's favourite and instead falls somewhere in the middle. If the middle child felt neglected throughout childhood, they might struggle with co-dependency or self-confidence issues. They might also excel at mediating conflicts in their personal or professional life in the future. Another respondent stated that she believes the youngest sibling gets special treatment from their parents: "It was a bit unfair for me being a middle child because my parents focused on my older brother because there was like an 11-year gap between us and my older brother, so they focused more on going to school than me" (R5, Page 1, Line 10). As Fletcher (2021) said, middle children may believe their parents need to give them more attention. It is thought that middle children engage with people less and get less concentration, which has a detrimental effect on the child's self-esteem (Jimoh, 2019). The family's middle children have many stereotypes. Children in the center are frequently ignored and unhappy for different reasons. This involves being sandwiched between the youngest and eldest (Pant et al., 2016). There is insufficient hard evidence to support the claim that birth order inevitably has a significant impact, which makes their childhood uneven and unique from other children's. Otherwise, parental treatment matters the most because if there is any variation in how they are treated, a child may feel more or less favoured depending on preference or affection. A parent's preference for one child over another is known as parental bias (FinziDottan & Cohen, 2010). Being the middle child can be difficult if you feel ignored, misinterpreted, or devalued in the family. Parents' preferences may be interpreted by them as "unfair or unjust," which leads to adverse effects (e.g., low self-esteem, poor well-being, sibling conflicts, etc.). It is expected to associate being the family's least favoured child with having an unfavourable standard for the family (Conteh, 2021). There was a lousy balance between their sibling warmth and bias when parents treated their children differently. Further, children in the middle who struggle to fit in inside their family and could experience a tightness between their siblings find it more challenging to experience sentiments of affiliation or concern for society. They may also be more remarkably unable to cooperate or get along with others (Gfroerer et al., 2003). As a result, refute the assertion that middle siblings struggle to identify their position in the family and may feel squeezed between their siblings. Middle children frequently possess a more subdued or quiet demeanour than their younger and older siblings. Given that they are situated within, they are less prone to feel unique or different from their siblings, practically on par with them.

Furthermore, middle children encounter obstacles in obtaining a privileged position because they never have the importance in the family chance to command the whole focus of parents. Therefore, they must battle nonstop to keep ahead of their younger siblings (Tam & Ha, 2011). Since they are not the eldest or the middle child, the youngest could feel obligated to strive to grab a parent's focus.

Coping Mechanisms of Middle Children in the Family

Despite the struggles, middle children have different coping methods, including motivation towards themselves and sharing their unsaid feelings with their friends. The results have identified two emerging themes as the coping strategies of middle children: The independence of the middle children and their peers' relationships are pure.

Middle Children's Relationship with Their peers

The participants coped with their problems by running to their friends to share their unsaid feelings and burst out their emotions. Middle children are being heard by their friends about their struggles and problems. One participant stated, "I always approach my friends to share my feelings whenever I have problems within my family" (R2, page 2, line 24). In addition, Wahi (2023) said that middle children are frequently excellent at developing close, lasting friendships. They are dependable confidants and devoted friends because of their empathy and dispute-resolution capacity. According to another respondent, "I always open up with my friends if I have problems because they are good listeners that I can share with them about my problems within my family without hesitation, and they give me advice to solve my problems" (R5, page 3, line 25). These findings indicate that those positioned between their siblings' birth orders have a strong sense of morality and a propensity to pursue causes. Frequently, middle children rely on friends, possibly as a coping technique for the irrational fear that they have been disregarded in the familial dynamic (Cassidy, 2023).

Since they are neither the family's favorite child nor always the high achiever, the middle child is sometimes referred to as the "lost child" since they are supposed to feel alien to everyone else (Odiase & Ohre, 2020). Because they rely more on their friends than family members for support and attention, they typically have the least "acting out" challenges and are quite gregarious. Another said, "When I have problems or resentment at home, my older sister is the person I always approach to talk about it" (R7, Page 3, Line 24). These results show that each respondent deals with the problems above similarly to how others deal with their problems. Not only that, but they also have to deal with the problems that their siblings bring. Their tight-knit bonds come to light as they choose to overcome these problems together, leading to an agreement between the siblings (Scott, 2020). Thus bringing a sense of consonance to the relationship of the middle child to their siblings.

Independence of the Middle Children

The participant coped with their problem by keeping it to themselves to avoid being dependent on others. They are fighting alone to conquer their problems. One of our participants said, "I motivate myself, like fight even if other people gossip about me; I do not care what people say about me because I know who I am" (R3, page 2, line 20). Middle children may develop a strong desire to be self-sufficient as they age to differentiate themselves from the group (Patheka, 2023). This may appear as a coping strategy to set oneself apart from one's siblings and be acknowledged for one's unique abilities.

Another participant said, "I always keep my frustrations when I encounter uncertainties. Also, I always motivate myself to cope with it at all costs" (R8, Page 2, Line 24). Similarly, middle children may have a strong sense of independence from an early age and place more emphasis on friendships outside of the home since they feel "on their own" (Regan, 2021). The outcomes show that middle children typically grow into strong, independent adults since they do not receive the same level of attention as the youngest or eldest. Middle children typically grow up with a strong sense of independence because they do not receive the same level of attention as the youngest or eldest (Liliana, 2024).

Insights of the Middle Children in the Family

In families, middle children often want to feel appreciated and validated by their parents and siblings. They wish for moments where their efforts and uniqueness are recognized and celebrated. Middle children strive to find their place and feel important among older and younger siblings. They do not just seek material things; they crave emotional support and recognition for who they are. This desire for validation is a big part of middle children's lives, showing how meaningful family relationships are for them.

External Validation from Significant Others

In family settings, middle children often desire acknowledgment and recognition for their unique contributions and abilities, seeking to discover their identity. The participant's insights talk about their wishes and wants to be heard. They wish to be seen by their parents to gain validation, appreciation, and love. It shows their views and purpose in growing as a middle child, as well as their comments and experiences in life. One of our respondents stated, *"I do not seem to be understood by my family; maybe I just wish that they would hear me better. It is like I am becoming an independent growing, but sometimes I need guidance"* (R5, Page 3, Line 25). Children and middle children are full-fledged persons with the right to express their views in all matters affecting them and require that those views be heard (Ben-Arie, 2005). According to another respondent, *"That kind of attention, validation, and love from my parents is the only wish I have been dreaming of"* (R8, Page 2, Line 32.) As middle children express their wishes in life, most answers are about seeking validation and appreciation from their parents. Emotion validation by parents has positive outcomes for children's emotional development, particularly in vulnerable families (Lambi, 2020). Also, part of being a parent is considering both positive and negative outcomes and giving middle children a voice in reporting on their own experiences and well-being. In order to hear the other side of their child to prevent making their child feel unloved and to overcome the essence of business or side in a family by their parents to their children, and also by teaching parents how to be emotionally supportive should therefore be beneficial to their children (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). Understanding middle children and how they act can help parents recognize and address potential issues and devise a solution to avoid conflict (Ellis et al., 2013).

Growing up in a family as the middle child can be an exciting experience. It means being neither the oldest nor the youngest but somewhere in between. Middle children often have to find their path among siblings. They might sometimes feel overlooked, but they are the most trusted child in the family. One of our respondents stated, *"As I grow as a middle child, I realized that I am the most trusted child in the family when it comes to household chores or decisions in life"* (R1, Page 1, Line 14) in somewhat middle children experiences and struggles made them grow independently that is why they are the most trusted child among their family because most middles are flexible, good negotiators, trusted, and very social (Leman, 2009). They are also more drawn to relationships outside the family than their siblings and more likely to move further away from home when they are grown. They are also known to grow up well, being creative, problem solvers, and great negotiators. In the same manner, respondents revealed, *"Well, as a middle child, as I grow further, I feel I am knowledgeable enough about how to conquer every challenge and obstacle in life because I have grown independently, not just depending on my parents or my siblings even the decisions in my life that I made"* (R7, page 1, line 14). Lying in the middle can also help children develop a strong feeling of independence because they do not always feel as prominent as their siblings. The youngest sibling is born, and middleborns have to adjust. They must constantly bargain and make concessions to "fit in" with all of them. It aids in their increased independence and maintenance of reasonable anticipations. Ultimately, however, due to the birth order in the family, one of our respondents shared his frequent experiences, *"My insights about middle children are that I am feeling behind, out of place, or else taken for granted by my family. Often, because our parents are always tolerated or spoiled my younger and eldest siblings, I feel like I am overshadowed within this family"* (R2, Page 1, Line 12). Alfred Adler's research on birth order influences personality formation, particularly in middle children. Middle children may struggle to identify their identity and family position and become independent and adaptable. Their birth order may influence their traits and habits,

leading to self-sufficiency, flexibility, and influence in the family.

CONCLUSIONS

This research emphasizes the struggles, coping mechanisms, and insights of the middle children within Barangay Zone III Santa Cruz, Davao del Sur. The results and findings of this study showcased that the middle children experienced unfair treatment in the family as their struggle, the pure relationship of the middle children with their peers and the independence of the middle children as the coping mechanism, and existential validation of the middle child as the insight. Often, middle children feel they are not a favorite in their families and feel neglected and overshadowed by their siblings. To deal with these, middle children ran to their peers to express their feelings and let out their emotions to cope with their problems. Despite the challenges, middle children frequently long for times when their accomplishments and uniqueness are recognized and they want to be valued and affirmed by their parents and siblings. This study serves as a motivation for all middle children that is beneficial for them in order to surpass their circumstances and continue their meaningful lives.

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