



The Unfolding Tapestry of Rural Work Life: A Narrative Inquiry into the Lived Experiences of Middle-Aged Contractual Workers in Northern Luzon

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ABSTRACT

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This narrative inquiry explored the lived experiences of ten middle-aged contractual workers (aged 40-65) in rural Northern Luzon, Philippines. Through in-depth, co-constructed interviews, the study aimed to understand how participants navigate the complexities of their employment and find meaning in their lives. The analysis revealed four primary resonant threads that weave through their stories: (1) Cultivating Contentment in Place, where they find fulfillment in their rural lifestyle; (2) The Social Fabric of Perseverance and Survival, highlighting how strong family and community ties provide crucial support; (3) Navigating Temporality, which demonstrates their ability to find peace and purpose despite job insecurity; and (4) The Ethic of *Kapwa*, showing how they derive a profound sense of purpose from serving others and their community. The findings offer a powerful counter-narrative to traditional models of midlife development that prioritize job stability. They highlight the unique resilience of these workers and the significant role that a sense of purpose, community, and rural living play in their well-being. This paper contributes a fresh perspective on contractual employment by showing how individual narratives, when viewed through a holistic lens, challenge prevailing preconceptions.

KEYWORDS:

middle-aged adults, Filipino contractual workers, rural Northern Luzon, narrative inquiry

1.0. INTRODUCTION

The modern global economy is defined by a significant shift in labor relations, characterized by the rise of non-standard employment arrangements and the flourishing of the "gig economy" (Lemmon et al., 2016). This transition has fundamentally altered traditional career trajectories and has normalized precarious work, such as contractual, project-based, and consultancy arrangements, which often lack the security of tenure and comprehensive benefits associated with regular employment (Fisher, 2023; Rojo, 2024; Sique, 2019). This precarity can lead to financial instability, limited career progression, and a reduction in stable work relationships, posing a significant challenge to workers' well-being (Mangaoang, 2021; Kosanovich, 2018). Paradoxically, despite these well-documented disadvantages, contractual

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work continues to be a prevalent and even thriving form of employment (Betti, 2018; Carr et al., 2024; King-Dejardin, 2021). Workers in these roles sometimes report high levels of job satisfaction and perseverance, which suggests that factors beyond financial compensation are critical to their resilience and success (Abanto et al., 2024; Orbeta & Paqueo, 2016).

This paradox is particularly salient in the Philippine context, where the practice of "contractualization" or Endo (end-of-contract) has become a deeply entrenched feature of the labor landscape. While labor laws exist to protect workers' rights, loopholes are often exploited by employers to prevent the regularization of employees, thereby denying them security of tenure and the associated benefits (Digital Commons @ Salve Regina, 2023; Legal Research Philippines, 2024). Given this systemic challenge, the ability of Filipino workers to sustain themselves through contractual work, particularly in rural settings, presents a compelling area for inquiry. The decision to remain in such work is often influenced by complex motivations, including familial obligations and the pursuit of social mobility, which are

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deeply rooted in Filipino culture (Philippine Social Science Council, 1994).

The present study focuses on the lived experiences of middle-aged Filipino contractual workers in the rural Luzon setting. Middle adulthood, spanning approximately ages 40 to 60, is a critical developmental stage characterized by a unique confluence of personal, social, and economic pressures (Silvestre, 2023; Carr, 2019). During this period, individuals often shoulder significant responsibilities related to family support, financial management, and health concerns. The precarity of contractual work, with its inherent job insecurity, can amplify the stress and uncertainty of midlife, potentially contributing to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression (Blanchflower, 2020; Kessler & Wang, 2008). Therefore, understanding how middle-aged adults navigate contractual employment in a rural setting offers a crucial perspective on resilience, coping mechanisms, and the intricate balance between personal well-being and professional stability. While quantitative studies have explored aspects of job satisfaction, there is a notable scarcity of in-depth, qualitative narratives that capture the rich and nuanced experiences of this specific demographic. By employing the narrative approach of Clandinin and Connelly, this study seeks to fill this gap in the literature.

In light of these considerations, the purpose of this research is to explore the lived experiences of middle-aged Filipino contractual workers in a rural setting, with the aim of providing a comprehensive narrative account. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following research questions: What are the lived experiences of middle-aged Filipino contractual workers in a rural setting?, What factors influence their decision to continue in contractual employment, and how do these factors contribute to their prolonged tenure in their positions?, How do they navigate and cope with the challenges associated with job insecurity?

2.0. METHODOLOGY

Research Design. This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing a narrative inquiry approach to

explore and analyze the lived experiences of middle-aged contractual workers in rural Northern Luzon. Qualitative design is particularly suited to this research as it allows for an in-depth, holistic understanding of personal experiences and the social contexts in which they are embedded (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Narrative inquiry, as a specific form of qualitative research, is grounded in the understanding that individuals' lives are a collection of stories that are continuously shaped and reshaped by time, place, and social interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Caine et al., 2020). This approach is ideal for capturing the rich, nuanced, and evolving perspectives of participants, as it focuses on their personal narratives, including memories, daily experiences, and future aspirations. By analyzing these narratives, we can gain insight into how middle-aged Filipino contractual workers make meaning of their work, navigate its challenges, and develop strategies for coping and resilience.

Participants. The study utilized a purposeful sampling method to select participants whose specific attributes and experiences aligned with the research objectives. The inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: (1) currently employed in contractual work for a minimum of two years, (2) aged between 40 and 59 years, and (3) a resident and worker in a rural area of Northern Luzon, Philippines. Individuals engaged in informal labor (e.g., day laborers, seasonal farm workers, household helpers) or self-sufficient, independently employed roles (e.g., small vendors, micro-entrepreneurs) were excluded, as the focus of the study was on formal contractual arrangements within an organization or agency. While narrative inquiry can be conducted with a single participant, a larger number of participants allows for a broader range of experiences, providing deeper insights and facilitating the identification of shared narrative threads (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To achieve this, a total of ten middle-aged contractual workers were purposefully selected to provide diverse narratives that could be thematically connected and analyzed.

The profiles of the ten participants are summarized in Table 1 below, with pseudonyms used to protect their identities.

Table 1. Participant Profile Summary

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Status	Current Position
Mike	Male	56	27	Married with Kids	Staff Worker
Alice	Female	47	4	Single Parent	Health Worker
Liza	Female	43	5	Single, Breadwinner	Mobile Teacher
Jenny	Female	44	7	Single, Breadwinner	Forest Ranger
Roland	Male	58	16	Married with Kids	Head Security Officer
Jose	Male	41	7	Single	Firefighter
Ernesto	Male	53	10	Married with Kids	Security Guard

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Matet	Female	40	4	Single	Teacher
Tina	Female	40	15	Married with Kids	Admin Staff
Vetsay	Female	45	9	Married with Kids	LGU Link

Data Collection. The data collection process began with a request for referrals from administrators and colleagues within various agencies in Northern Luzon, using the study's inclusion criteria as a guide. Initial phone and Facebook Messenger conversations were conducted with potential participants to confirm their eligibility and schedule face-to-face interviews. This direct, in-person approach was prioritized to foster a strong rapport and create a safe space for authentic storytelling, which is fundamental to the narrative inquiry method (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). All interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient for the participants. Strict ethical protocols were followed to protect participants' rights and ensure confidentiality. Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an informed consent form (ICF) that detailed the study's purpose, their right to confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Verbal consent for audio recording was also obtained. All audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely, accessible only to the primary researcher, and any potentially identifying information was removed during the transcription and analysis phases. A brief debriefing was held at the conclusion of each interview to address any emotional distress and ensure the well-being of the participants.

Data Analysis. The data analysis followed the principles of narrative inquiry, as outlined by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). The process involved a systematic approach to interpret the coconstructed narratives: *Initial Transcription:* All audio-recorded interviews were meticulously transcribed verbatim to preserve the authenticity of the participants' voices; *Contextualization:* The narratives were contextualized within Clandinin and Connelly's three commonplaces of sociality, place, and temporality to understand the personal-social, physical, and historical dimensions of their experiences; *Narrative Construction:* For each participant, a detailed narrative account was constructed using a pseudonym. This involved organizing their stories into thematic outlines, which helped to identify recurring patterns of emotions, tensions, and perspectives; *Identification of Narrative Threads:* The individual narratives were then analyzed to identify overarching themes or "narrative threads" that cut across multiple stories. This step involved looking for shared experiences, coping mechanisms, and motivations; and *Interpretive Account:* A final interpretive account was written, representing a collaboration between the researcher's analysis and the participants' voices. This account moves beyond a simple collection of themes to provide a rich, coherent narrative of the collective experience.

Methodological Integrity. To ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the research, several measures were implemented. Member checks were performed by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed narratives for review, allowing them to clarify, revise, and affirm that their stories were accurately represented (Creswell, 2013). This process reinforced the cocreative nature of the study and ensured that the participants' voices were respected and correctly interpreted. Furthermore, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to document methodological decisions, personal biases, and emerging insights, enhancing the transparency and rigor of the research. The continuous guidance and critical feedback from a faculty advisor also contributed to the overall integrity of the methodology and interpretation.

3.0. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The lived experiences of middle-aged contractual workers in rural Northern Luzon are complex and multidimensional. Following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) narrative inquiry framework, the analysis of participant interviews revealed several resonant threads that weave through their stories. These threads, co-constructed with the participants, highlight the intersection of their individual narratives with their professional lives, social relationships, and the unique setting of their rural environment.

3.1 Resonant Thread 1: Cultivating Contentment in Place. The most prominent thread in the participants' narratives was a profound sense of contentment with their contractual status, which was deeply connected to their place in rural Northern Luzon. Rather than viewing their work as a temporary hardship, they framed it as a stable source of livelihood that enabled a lifestyle they valued. This is a crucial distinction from much of the existing literature on contractual work, which tends to emphasize stress and job insecurity.

For participants like Mike, Tina, and Liza, contentment was a direct result of the rural environment, which provided not only a peaceful setting but also practical resources. Mike expressed, *I am content, and I feel stable because I am a simple man.* This contentment was not an abstract feeling but was grounded in the reality of his farm, garden, and the availability of basic resources. Similarly, Tina expressed this by saying, *I want to stay in rural life where it is not complicated.* These narratives contrast sharply with urban employment stories, where proximity to work often means higher living expenses and a more complex life.

Adding to this, Jenny's narrative highlights that contentment is also born from personal growth and

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professional satisfaction. She stated, *I think the factors that had influenced my decision to stay are my commitment and love of my work... I had also improved myself and was always interested in learning.* For Jenny, a sense of personal value and continuous self-improvement, stemming from her work as a public servant, contributes significantly to her feeling of contentment. This resonates with Liza's narrative of being a mobile missionary teacher, highlighting a purpose that transcends her employment status and financial compensation. She finds fulfillment in a *'vocation rather than a job'*, a sentiment echoed by Matet, who felt happy and fulfilled seeing the results of her work in her students.

This narrative thread suggests that for these individuals, their sense of professional fulfillment is less about the formal structure of their employment and more about the personal meaning they derive from their work and their connection to their community and environment.

3.2 Resonant Thread 2: The Social Fabric of Perseverance and Survival. Despite the contentment tied to their place, the narratives also revealed a resonant thread of perseverance and survival, often rooted in their sociality—their relationships with family, colleagues, and the people they serve. The participants' decision to continue their contractual work was frequently driven by a profound sense of loyalty to their families, as demonstrated by Alice, who stated, *'It [contractual work] gives you the strength to work for your family even with a small salary.'* This statement shows how a sense of obligation to her family provides the strength to endure the shortcomings of her job.

The narratives of Jose and Ernesto reveal a similar dynamic, where good relationships with a boss and colleagues are enough to sustain them, even in the absence of a permanent position. As Roland explained, knowing his *'coworkers are almost like family'* made him more likely to stay in a job with inherent instability. The tension of managing bad work environments was also present. Alice's story of having to *'endure'* mistreatment from her boss highlights the delicate and often manipulative social dynamics that arise in a system where job security is tenuous. Yet, even in these difficult moments, her story is one of resilience and a willingness to tolerate hardship for the sake of survival and family.

3.3 Resonant Thread 3: The Ethic of *Kapwa* and Finding Meaning in Service

In addition to the bonds of perseverance and survival, another powerful resonant thread emerged, rooted in the Filipino cultural value of *Kapwa*—a shared inner self or a sense of 'we' that extends beyond the individual. The participants' narratives demonstrate that their work provides a

deep sense of purpose that goes beyond personal gain, as they find fulfillment in helping others. This is distinct from

a survival-driven motivation and instead highlights an intrinsic value placed on communal well-being.

Liza's experience exemplifies this ethic. When her salary was once delayed, she received food from her students' parents, an act that exemplifies *Pagmamalasakit* (empathy) and *Bayanihan* (communal solidarity). This spontaneous act of care transforms a professional challenge into a shared community mission, showing how their social ties become a crucial form of support that mitigates the stress and financial insecurity of contractual work.

Similarly, Tina's narrative revealed how she found profound meaning in her work by assisting her elderly clients, viewing her role not just as a job but as an act of service. Her dedication to their well-being provided a sense of purpose that mitigated the frustrations of job insecurity and low pay. This finding suggests that for some contractual workers, the meaning of their labor is not solely transactional but is deeply intertwined with a reciprocal sense of duty and shared humanity, where giving back to the community becomes a source of personal fulfillment.

3.4 Resonant Thread 4: Navigating Temporality—Living in the Present while Balancing Past and Future.

The final resonant thread is temporality—the way participants' stories are shaped by their past experiences and future aspirations. Their narratives reveal a continuous negotiation between personal desires and practical realities. Jose, for example, is a licensed professional who has chosen to accept contractual work. His story is defined by the tension between his professional qualifications (a part of his past and a symbol of his career aspirations) and the practical reality of limited job openings. His statement, *'What matters most is that I have a job where I can use what I learned in school,'* shows an acceptance of his current situation while still valuing his professional identity.

Other participants, like Roland and Vetsay, navigate the uncertainty of their careers with a proactive mindset. Roland's narrative of his contract being *'endorsed to the next agency'* illustrates the fluid, non-linear nature of their careers. They do not follow a traditional, permanent career path but instead thrive in a state of constant transition. Similarly, Matet's statement, *'I accept that it's my fate,'* highlights a coping strategy where she re-frames her situation, not as a failure, but as part of life. This temporal thread underscores that their lives are not stagnant; they are a dynamic process of adapting, persevering, and finding meaning in a continuously changing work landscape.

4.0. CONCLUSION

This qualitative study, guided by the principles of narrative inquiry, explored the lived experiences of ten middle-aged contractual workers in rural Northern Luzon. The narratives revealed that, contrary to much of the existing literature, these participants found a profound sense of purpose and

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contentment within their contractual roles. Their experiences were not defined by the precarity often associated with contractual work but were instead shaped by a unique convergence of personal values, social support, and geographical context.

The resonant threads of Cultivating Contentment in Place, The Social Fabric of Perseverance and Survival, Navigating Temporality, and The Ethic of *Kapwa* provide a fresh perspective on this phenomenon. The participants' contentment was deeply tied to their physical environment, where their rural "place" provided a foundation for a simple, family-focused lifestyle. Their perseverance, in turn, was rooted in their sociality, relying on healthy relationships with family and colleagues, which provided both emotional support and a sense of shared purpose that transcended their job insecurity. Their approach to temporality revealed a mindset of radical acceptance, as they consciously navigated the present while finding dignity in their work and hope for the future. Most notably, the narratives highlighted a resonant thread rooted in the Filipino concept of *Kapwa*—the shared inner self that fosters a sense of shared humanity and collective responsibility.

Ultimately, the participants' stories illustrate how deeply ingrained cultural values provide a powerful framework for their resilience. This finding demonstrates that for these workers, their satisfaction and fulfillment come not from the security of a permanent position, but from the ability to serve others, contribute to their community, and fulfill their duties as professionals. Their narratives reveal a powerful paradox: while their employment may lack formal security, they find deep meaning and stability by living out a personal and cultural vocation. Their meaningful work is not a means to an end, but an end in itself—a source of peace and fulfillment.

5.0 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study's findings are constrained by several key limitations. First, the small sample size of ten participants, while appropriate for narrative inquiry, limits the generalizability of the findings to the broader population of contractual workers. Second, the study focused exclusively on participants in rural Northern Luzon. Their experiences are likely influenced by a lower cost of living and stronger community ties, which may not be representative of contractual workers in urban or highly industrialized areas. Finally, the research focused on middle-aged workers (40-65 years). Future studies may find that older contractual workers, particularly those approaching retirement, face different challenges related to financial security and health, which could significantly alter their narratives of contentment and resilience.

6.0. PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE PAPER

This paper offers several valuable contributions to the understanding of contemporary work and life. The findings present a counter-narrative to traditional midlife development models that often emphasize job stability and security as essential for success. This research highlights how family values, community engagement, and a connection to a rural place can serve as powerful foundations for resilience and development.

Specifically, this study demonstrates that:

- **Generativity Beyond Finance:** The participants' positive psychological functioning aligns with Erik Erikson's concept of generativity, but is expressed through personal and interpersonal development rather than purely financial or career-based success. They find fulfillment in nurturing their families, serving their communities, and sharing their knowledge.
- **Redefining Job Satisfaction:** The research challenges the notion that monetary compensation is the primary driver for job retention and satisfaction. It suggests that a focus on a healthy work environment and a work-life balance that accommodates a preferred lifestyle can lead to profound contentment and loyalty, even without job permanence.
- **Insights for Policy and Practice:** The findings can be applied to fields such as developmental and industrial psychology, as well as rural development. They underscore the importance of fostering supportive work environments and recognizing the holistic needs of employees beyond their formal contracts.

7.0. DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research are recommended. A fruitful direction would be to explore the narratives of contractual workers who have shifted careers in midlife, to understand how they cope with the challenges of adjusting and learning new skills. Additionally, comparative studies on the lived experiences of contractual workers across different age groups and those in highly urbanized areas would provide a richer understanding of how diverse geographical and socioeconomic contexts impact their work opportunities, lifestyles, and overall quality of life.

8.0 DECLARATION OF NO COMPETING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

9.0 ETHICAL APPROVAL

All procedures performed in this study involving human participants followed the ethical standards of the institutional

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and/or national research committee, with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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