

Hiya and Utang Na Loob: A Phenomenological Study on the Lived Experiences of Filipino Firstborn Children

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ABSTRACT

In the Filipino family structure, firstborn children often bear the weight of heightened expectations, emotional labor, and cultural values such as hiya (shame) and utang na loob (debt of gratitude). These constructs shape familial interactions and individual behavior, yet little is known about how they are internalized and negotiated by firstborns during early adulthood. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of four Filipino firstborns aged 22–25 from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the study uncovered how hiya serves as both a behavioral regulator and emotional suppressor, while utang na loob often manifests as an obligation that constrains personal agency. Participants described internalized sacrifice, emotional labor, and repressed autonomy as core elements of their experience. Findings suggest a need to re-express these cultural constructs in ways that honor family ties without compromising individual well-being. The study offers implications for culturally responsive mental health support and family education programs.

Keywords: hiya, utang na loob, firstborn child, Filipino family, phenomenology, emotional labor

INTRODUCTION

The Filipino family is deeply rooted in collectivist traditions, with values like hiya (shame) and utang na loob (debt of gratitude) shaping not only interpersonal relations but also individual identity. These cultural norms are especially pronounced in the lives of panganay (firstborn children), who are often cast into roles of caregivers, moral compasses, and secondary parents (Alampay & Jocson, 2020). While these roles intend to cultivate responsibility, they may also instill pressure, self-silencing, and conflict between personal aspiration and familial obligation.

Firstborn children are frequently expected to set the standard for siblings, act as emotional buffers within households, and offer financial or moral support regardless of their own circumstances (Peña-Alampay et al., 2020). This burden can be compounded by verbalized or implicit reminders of utang na loob, framing parental sacrifices as moral debts to be repaid. Simultaneously, the fear of being labeled “walang hiya” (shameless) discourages dissent, help-seeking, or even self-care.

Despite the prevalence of these values in everyday life, few studies have centered the narratives of Filipino firstborns. This research seeks to fill that gap.

Statement of the Problem

This study sought to explore the following:

1. **How do Filipino firstborn children experience and interpret the cultural values of hiya and utang na loob within their family setting?**
2. **In what ways do these values influence their roles, decisions, behaviors, and emotional well-being?**

3. How do firstborns reconcile their personal goals with the expectations rooted in these cultural constructs?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A **phenomenological qualitative design** was employed to investigate the lived experiences of firstborn children, allowing deep exploration of subjective perceptions around *hiya* and *utang na loob* (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

Participants

Four participants aged 22–25 were purposively selected. All were the eldest in their households (biologically or functionally), from varying economic and regional backgrounds. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions designed to uncover personal experiences related to familial roles, *hiya*, and *utang na loob*. Interviews were transcribed and member-checked for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method, focusing on significant statements, formulated meanings, and emergent themes. Trustworthiness was enhanced through triangulation and member validation (Nowell et al., 2017).

RESULTS

Theme 1: Hiya as Behavioral Regulator and Suppressor of Needs

Participants expressed that *hiya* operates as an internalized boundary—limiting emotional expression, requests for help, and even career choices. It served as a deterrent to confrontation and self-advocacy (Flores & Yacat, 2021).

“I don't ask for money, even when I'm starving. I don't want them to think I'm shameless.” — Participant II

Theme 2: Utang na Loob as Emotional Debt and Conditional Worth

Rather than voluntary gratitude, participants described *utang na loob* as a weaponized obligation. Financial support was often tied to expectations of compliance.

“They always say, ‘Don't you have *utang na loob*?’ Like I owe them for every little thing.” — Participant II

This aligns with recent re-interpretations of *utang na loob* as both cultural virtue and coercive tool (Garcia & Agbisit, 2022).

Theme 3: Eldest Child Syndrome—Sacrifice, Compliance, and Deferred Autonomy

Participants detailed personal sacrifices—including leaving school, suppressing dreams, and shouldering household responsibilities—often without recognition. These acts were described as expected, not exceptional.

“I left school to work. No one told me to, but I knew it was my duty.” — Participant I

Theme 4: Cultural Constructs of Worth Through Endurance

Participants equated endurance and emotional suppression with moral character. Expressing stress or failure was perceived as weakness, especially when younger siblings were watching.

“Even when I cry at school, I hide it. I’m the role model.” — Participant II

DISCUSSION

This study confirms that *hiya* and *utang na loob* act as powerful social regulators in Filipino families. For firstborn children, they produce a unique moral economy that binds self-worth to family-centered sacrifice (Salvador, 2023).

While these values foster familial interdependence, they also risk distorting the firstborn’s sense of autonomy. Participants reported guilt for pursuing personal goals and fear of failing to meet idealized images projected by family members. This finding echoes research by Delos Santos and Rivera (2021) on emotional labor in Filipino daughters.

Nonetheless, participants also demonstrated agency—strategically negotiating their roles and redefining *hiya* as personal dignity rather than social shame. Such adaptive meaning-making reflects the evolving identity of Filipino youth balancing tradition with self-determination (Reyes, 2020).

CONCLUSION

Filipino firstborn children carry not only the weight of birth order, but also the cultural expectations tied to *hiya* and *utang na loob*. These values, while rooted in collectivist respect and reciprocity, often generate emotional tension and behavioral suppression. Recognizing and reconstructing these cultural codes may lead to more equitable, nurturing family systems that honor both tradition and individuality.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Mental health programs** should address culturally specific stressors like *hiya* and *utang na loob* in firstborn dynamics.
- **Family life educators** should promote intergenerational understanding about shifting values and the burden of expectations.
- **Further research** should explore gender differences and include middle and youngest siblings for comparative insights.

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