

Walay Sala Ang Bata!: The Lived Experiences of Illegitimate Children Who Are Products of an Affair

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the lived experiences of illegitimate children born from extramarital affairs in the Philippine context, focusing on their lived experiences, family dynamics, and perceptions on marriage and infidelity. While previous studies have already ventured into the lives of illegitimate children, the population focus was too general, and most of these studies focused on the topics of social stigma and coping mechanisms, leaving room for more discussion on the lives of illegitimate children, particularly those who are born from an extramarital affair. The study employed a phenomenological approach, with seven participants from the province of Cebu interviewed. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, six major themes emerged for illegitimate children's lived experiences: societal stigma, emotional distress, facing legal and inheritance limitations, seeking social support, learning cognitive and emotional regulation, and utilizing behavioral resilience. Four major themes for their family dynamics: distant relationship caused by separation, close relationship formed through shared living, acceptance from peripheral extended family, and exclusion from family. While the findings of the study revealed that illegitimate children view marriage seriously as something as a foundation of a secure family, connected to happiness, a form of lifelong commitment, and/or it became a source of fear because of the history of their parents. While they show huge scorn towards infidelity, as it is not only harmful to the marital family but also to the children involved, resulting in these children witnessing the collapse of their family and experiencing social stigma.

Keywords: Illegitimate children, Extramarital affairs, Social stigma, Family dynamics, Coping mechanisms, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

Illegitimate children are defined as children born outside a valid marriage. Legally, this definition serves as one basis for labeling children as illegitimate. Another reason for such labeling arises when an individual does not conform to societal standards (Beliardouh, 2024). Studies have found that individuals labeled as illegitimate often face legal, social, and emotional challenges due to societal and cultural perceptions of legitimacy (Yadav, 2016). While discussions on illegitimate children exist, those specifically born from extramarital affairs remain an underrepresented demographic in scholarly research.

Globally, there has been a notable increase in births outside of marriage since the 1960s. In Latin America, countries such as Colombia and Chile report non-marital birth rates exceeding 60%, marking a significant rise in illegitimate children over the past 50 years (Chamie, 2017). In the Philippines, illegitimate births accounted for at least half of all registered births in 12 regions in 2020 (Registered Live Births in the Philippines, 2022). Despite legal advancements that allow illegitimate children to carry their father's surname and claim inheritance rights in the Philippines (Republic Act No. 9255; Article 895 of the Civil Code), disparities persist in how they are perceived and treated in society. Studies in Southeast Asia, such as in Indonesia and Malaysia, have documented the social and legal discrimination faced by illegitimate children, often resulting in psychological distress and a diminished sense of belonging (Sabrina et al., 2020; Roslan & Zul-kifli, 2022). Local studies in the Philippines also highlight how children born outside of marriage experience social stigma, discrimination, and abandonment.

Despite these growing trends, research that specifically examines the experiences of illegitimate children born from extramarital affairs remains scarce. Most literature focuses on illegitimate children as a broad category, without differentiating those whose parents were unmarried from those conceived due to an affair (Sabrina et al., 2020; Almazan, 2021; Engo et al., 2022; Roslan & Zul-kifli, 2022). Additionally, while studies have explored the legal challenges and social stigmas illegitimate children face (Sabrina et al., 2020; Roslan & Zul-kifli, 2022), there is limited understanding of their personal narratives.

To address these gaps, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the unique experiences of individuals born from extramarital affairs. The research shed light on the specific challenges they encounter, their resilience, and how their backgrounds influence their perceptions of relationships and societal norms. More than just the product of an affair, these children are individuals with their own identity, aspirations, and worth. Ultimately, this is not just a study of illegitimate children—it reminds us of our responsibility to create a culture that does not punish children for the choices of their parents and to ensure that no child is made to feel less simply due to the circumstances of their birth. This study explores their lived experiences, focusing on the emotional and psychological impacts of those conceived with this birth circumstance, their family dynamics with their complex family structure, the cultural and societal stigma they face, and their coping strategies to move forward. Moreover, this study offers new insights into their perception of marriage and infidelity, a perspective rarely examined in existing literature.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of illegitimate children who were products of an extramarital affair. Phenomenology was appropriate as it focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and give meaning to their personal experiences. The study sought to examine how being born from an affair influenced participants' identity, family relationships, experiences of societal stigma, and perceptions of marriage and intimate relationships.

By prioritizing first-person narratives, the phenomenological approach enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' subjective realities. This design ensured that findings were grounded in participants' own accounts, enabling a rich, authentic understanding of the phenomenon.

Research Setting

The study was conducted in the province of Cebu, Philippines, including participants from both urban and rural areas. Cebu was selected due to its strong cultural emphasis on family values, Roman Catholic beliefs, and traditional views on marriage and legitimacy, which significantly shape societal attitudes toward extramarital relationships and illegitimacy. This setting provided a relevant sociocultural context for examining the lived experiences of individuals born from affairs.

Research Sampling

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was used to identify participants who met the study's specific criteria. This sampling approach was appropriate given the topic's sensitivity and the need to recruit individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon. Purposive sampling allowed the researchers to intentionally select participants who could provide detailed and meaningful insights relevant to the research objectives.

Participants

The participants consisted of seven (7) illegitimate children born exclusively as a result of an extramarital affair and residing in Cebu, Philippines. Individuals born out of wedlock due to other circumstances, such as cohabitation or single parenthood, were excluded to maintain focus on the specific phenomenon under investigation.

All participants were 18 years old and above, with no upper age limit, to ensure autonomy and diversity of experiences. Limiting participation to adults allowed participants to freely reflect on their lived experiences without parental influence and contributed to the depth and credibility of the data collected.

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide consisting of open-ended questions. The instrument was designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding participants' identity formation, family relationships, experiences of stigma, emotional well-being, and perspectives on love, trust, marriage, and future aspirations. The semi-structured format allowed flexibility for probing while ensuring consistency across interviews.

With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Recordings were transcribed verbatim and anonymized to protect confidentiality. An informed consent form was provided prior to the interviews, outlining the study's objectives, procedures, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights, including the right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The interview guide was developed to encourage reflective and narrative responses. Questions were framed in a non-directive, culturally sensitive manner, allowing participants to describe their experiences freely while remaining aligned with the study's research focus. This approach supported the collection of rich, experience-based data central to phenomenological inquiry.

Translating the Final Interview Guide into Cebuano Dialect

To enhance comprehension and participant comfort, the finalized interview guide was translated into Cebuano, the participants' preferred language. The translation preserved the meaning and intent of the original questions while ensuring cultural and linguistic appropriateness. This process supported clearer expression of experiences and strengthened the authenticity of participants' responses.

Procedure

This study followed a systematic, ethically grounded process to collect and analyze data. All stages of the research process were designed to uphold participants' rights, dignity, safety, and confidentiality, while ensuring methodological rigor and research credibility.

Data Collection

Data collection employed a participant-centered approach to generate rich, trustworthy data while safeguarding participants' comfort, well-being, and autonomy. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, conducted with informed consent, audio-recorded for accuracy, and supported by structured debriefing, coordinated by a registered guidance counselor to ensure psychological support when necessary.

Before the Interview:

Potential participants were identified and contacted personally by the researchers, either in person or through online platforms when face-to-face meetings were not feasible. The purpose and procedures of the study were clearly explained, and participants were informed of their rights, including the option to participate voluntarily and to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was obtained prior to the interviews.

During the Interview (Actual Data Collection):

Semi-structured interviews were conducted based on participants' availability and preferred location to ensure privacy and comfort. The interviews followed a non-directive approach, allowing participants to narrate their experiences without pressure or judgment. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission to ensure accurate documentation of responses.

After the Interview:

A post-interview debriefing was conducted after each session to assess participants' emotional well-being. Participants were reassured that support was available, including referrals to licensed counselors or mental health professionals if needed. This step ensured ethical sensitivity given the emotionally charged nature of the topic.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification and review of themes, and the definition and naming of final themes. This systematic process ensured that patterns and meanings were derived directly from participants' narratives, supporting consistency and transparency in the analytical procedure.

The first phase involved researchers familiarizing themselves with the data by transcribing the audio recordings verbatim and repeatedly reading the transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the lived experiences shared.

Next, in the second phase, researchers systematically generated initial codes across the entire dataset to highlight significant statements. They focused on extracting meaningful phrases specifically related to the participants' identity formation, family dynamics, and encounters with societal stigma.

In the third phase, researchers began searching for themes by sorting the various codes into broader, more meaningful categories. They actively looked for overarching patterns that accurately reflected the complex realities of being born from an extramarital affair. All relevant coded data extracts were then collated beneath these potential overarching themes for further examination.

The fourth phase involved reviewing these initial themes against the raw data extracts to ensure they formed a coherent pattern. The researchers carefully verified that the themes genuinely represented the participants' actual stories rather than the researchers' own assumptions.

The fifth phase focused on researchers defining and naming the finalized themes. They captured the essence of each theme, ensuring the descriptions fully encompassed the participants' unique experiences. Clear, evocative names were then crafted to directly address the specific struggles, relationships, and triumphs of these illegitimate children.

Finally, the sixth phase centered on producing the written report by seamlessly weaving the analytical narrative with vivid, authentic data extracts. The researchers ensured that the presented findings remained firmly grounded in the true voices of the individuals interviewed. Ultimately, this rigorous six-phase thematic analysis framework successfully fulfilled the study's primary objective of deeply understanding and conveying the profound lived experiences of illegitimate children who were products of an affair.

Data Management

All collected data were handled in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (R.A. No. 10173). Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored in Google Drive folders accessible only to the researchers. Identifiers were removed from transcripts, and audio files were labeled without personal information. Data were retained only for the period required by the ethical standards of Cebu Technological University–Argao Campus and permanently deleted thereafter.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the research's focus on highly sensitive personal, social, and psychological issues, ethical considerations were at the absolute forefront of the study. The researchers ensured that every participant fully understood the research goals, the data collection methods, and the potential implications of their involvement. During the initial meetings, the researchers clearly discussed the relevance and objectives of the study, explained how the interviews would work, and detailed how they would secure the collected data to protect the participants' anonymity. The researchers also ensured that the participants understood their rights and the potential emotional

risks, giving them ample opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before moving forward. To further protect the participants, a brief debriefing session was conducted after each interview to assess their emotional well-being. Referral pathways to licensed counselors and mental health professionals were prepared in case psychological support was required. Additionally, all interviews were audio-recorded safely for transcription and analysis, ensuring the participants' stories were captured with the utmost accuracy. This comprehensive approach ensured that participation was rooted in transparency, care, and ethical responsibility.

Compensation

Participants were not offered monetary compensation to participate in the study. The researchers showed genuine appreciation for the borrowed time and the emotional effort required of the participants to share their lived experiences, giving simple tokens as gifts after each interview. This ensured that participation was driven by a willingness to share personal stories rather than by the pressure to expect material reward.

Voluntary Consent

The researchers provided every participant with a clear, comprehensive informed consent form detailing the study's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and confidentiality measures. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no pressure or coercion. To ensure full comprehension, the consent form was read in English and verbally explained in Cebuano as needed, and participants were given as much time as needed to make an informed decision about joining the study.

Confidentiality Pledge

To honor the deeply personal nature of participants' family histories, strict measures were put in place to protect their identities. The identities of both the interviewers and interviewees remained completely anonymous, and the content of every conversation was treated with the utmost confidentiality. All interview data were securely stored on media files accessible only to the researchers. During transcription, all personal details, including names, addresses, telephone numbers, and any other identifying information, were removed, ensuring that the respondents could never be traced or identified. This commitment to confidentiality was strictly upheld throughout the entire study and remains in place after its completion.

Right to Withdraw and Withhold Information

Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the research at any time without negative consequences. The researchers also made it clear that the participants had the right to refuse to answer any question that felt too uncomfortable or emotionally distressing, and that they could withhold any personal information they did not wish to share.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings of the study, presented and discussed in this section, aim to address the research gap identified in existing literature, which includes: (1) explaining how individuals who are products of an affair perceive marriage and infidelity; (2) describing the family dynamics of individuals who are products of an affair; and (3) presenting the lived experiences of individuals who know they are products of an affair. Through semi-structured, in-depth interviews analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, the data provide insights into the research questions and deepen our understanding of a population that is often overlooked and underdocumented, particularly in Cebu, Philippines.

Table 1. Perception of Marriage of an Individual who is a Product of an Affair

Themes	Subthemes
Fulfilling Union	Associated with happiness

	Foundation of a secured family
Lifelong	Choosing the right partner Vow of a lifetime Requiring commitment, honesty, and loyalty
Fearsome	Anxiety with marriage due to parents' action Ominous myths about paternal infidelity

Table 1 presents the perceptions of marriage among individuals who are products of an affair. The overarching themes identified are (1) fulfilling union, (2) lifelong commitment, and (3) fearsome.

Theme 1. Fulfilling Union: The participants perceive marriage as a fulfilling union. The data suggest that marriage is perceived to provide happiness and satisfaction. Beyond this, it is also fulfilling, as it marks the beginning of a family. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) associated with happiness and (2) foundation of a family.

Subtheme 1. Associated with Happiness: Love marriages with parental approval are the norm in the Philippines (Hayes, 2015). This is important to highlight because, in the country, most marriages are based on love. With marriage anchored in love, it is often expected to bring happiness to those who enter into it, as one participant mentioned:

P2: *“Marriage is kuan man gud mura siyag kaakibat sa happiness. Once na married naka, ties na gyud mo para malipay sa usa’g usa...”* (Marriage is like that partner of happiness. Once married, you’re tied together in joy...)

P2: *“Actually kung kaslon ikalipay man siguro, diba uban manghilak sa kalipay. Marriage is equals to happiness. Mao na.”* (Actually, when you get married, I think it brings happiness; some even cry tears of joy. Marriage is equal to happiness. That's it.)

Marriage is an act that solidifies romantic love (Sprecher and Hatfield, 2015). Hence, being able to marry the person one loves is believed to lead to happiness. This perception of marriage as something that brings happiness has empirical support, as a comparative study conducted in the United States and Japan showed that married adults are more likely to be happy and healthy than single adults (Wadley, 2025), demonstrating not only the emotional value marriage provides but also its associated mental and physical benefits.

Subtheme 2. Foundation of a secured family: Marriage is fulfilling in the sense that it unites two individuals into a family, with the ideal turn of events hereafter is having children. This forms a traditional nuclear family composed of married adults and dependent children. Individuals who are products of an affair perceive marriage as the foundation of a secured family. One participant emphasized that it is important for children to have married parents, as marriage provides assurance that the couple will not separate, allowing them to fulfill their roles as parents and always be present for their children. He stated:

P1: *“[Marriage is] very important jud sya. Kay kung naa gud kay parents gud kanang dili naman gud ka kinahanglan mo- dili naman gud ka kinahanglan na mo kuan kanang bitaw kana mo face alone sa problema nimo. Kay kahibalo ka ba nga naa kay kapangayoan. Naa kay ka istoryahan. Nya naay- kabalo ka, sure ka nga naay mo support nimo nga parent. Mao importante jud kaayo nga naay parents bitaw.”* ([Marriage is] very important. Because if you have parents, you don't need to... you don't need to face your problems alone. Because you know you have someone to ask. You have someone to talk to. And you know and you're sure that you have a parent who will support you. That's why it's very important to have parents.)

Another participant mentioned that marriage provides security to the family in the form of allowing them to discuss family matters openly without shame and assured that they will not be shunned by others:

P7: “*And then makahatag gani siyag security kada members gani na sa kuan- makahatag siyag security gani na proud ka maka ana ka nga dili nimo need nga likayan ang mga topic about family...*” (And then it can provide security for every member [of the family]—it can provide security that you're proud of, and you won't need to avoid topics about family...)

The responses revealed the participants' reflections on the lives they might have had if their parents had been married. Children born from an affair grew up with parents who were not legally bound to each other, making their upbringing more complicated due to legal constraints and social stigma. These personal experiences led them to infer that, had their parents been married, their lives would have been better, and the adversities they faced because of their birth circumstances might not have existed. Although marriage does not guarantee the secure and nurturing environment that children need, the U.S.-based Institute for Family Studies (2022) reported that marriage remains the most reliable social structure for promoting a stable environment for children. The participants' sense of security extends beyond perception. Marriage legally and socially recognizes two adults as a family, including their dependent children. Article 15, Section 2 of the 1987 Philippine Constitution likewise declares marriage as an inviolable social institution and the foundation of the family, which the State shall protect. This protection is evident in laws that criminalize extramarital affairs, such as Articles 333 and 334 of the Revised Penal Code, which define adultery and concubinage.

Theme 2. Lifelong: The participants perceive marriage as lifelong. Since marriage is anchored on love, it is not seen as a lifetime confinement but rather as a life of contentment. Marriage is a commitment to a single partner. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) choosing the right partner, (2) vow of a lifetime, and (3) requiring commitment, honesty, and loyalty.

Subtheme 1. Choosing the right partner: The Philippines remains one of only two nations that do not offer divorce (Hundley & Santos, 2019). This makes marriage a union that must be carefully considered, as it cannot be easily retracted; once done, it's set. The participants noted that because the union lasts a lifetime, it must be with a partner chosen wisely, with careful assessment of compatibility:

P3: “*Para nako ang kana gyud ang kasal gyud importante gyud kaayo siya basta... basta kana ganing tan-aw nimo na magkasinabot gyud mo anang tawhana kana imong ma pares dayon e kuan gyud na nimo kana ganing pillion gyud nimo sakto na magkauyon ba gyud mi, mo ani, diba kayha mo mag perminting away ani ing-ana.*” (For me marriage is very important if... if you find a partner compatible, thoroughly assess if you are compatible with each other, have the same views, or would it end up in constant quarelling?)

P5: “*So like, mao na nga for me gyud, like marriage should be thought wisely if you're going to marry— if you're going to marry someone. Kay, it's kuan man gud it's like, it's mura'g katong— unsa to nga kana ganing if mo sud naka di naka ka gawas.*” (So, for me, marriage should be thought about wisely if you're going to marry someone. Because it's like—it's like once you enter, you can't leave.)

One participant emphasized that she would only marry someone she is sure of, after carefully assessing her partner:

P6: “*And it's something I would only want to enter if sure na gyud kaayo ko sa ako nga partner gani.*” (And it's something I would only want to enter if I'm very sure about my partner.)

The emphasis on choosing the right partner reveals that participants perceive marriage as a commitment that must not be entered into impulsively, particularly given the strict marital laws in the Philippines. Marriage must be considered a point of no return. It is therefore important to select the right partner and assess compatibility beforehand. A U.S. study has found that individuals who marry impulsively experience relationship distress early in marriage, reflecting lower levels of satisfaction and higher levels of conflict (Lavner et al., 2016). Accordingly, the benefits of marriage are maximized when partners are carefully chosen, a perspective clearly reflected in the participants' responses.

Subtheme 2. Vow of a lifetime: The union through marriage is lifelong; therefore, participants perceive marriage as the beginning of fulfilling the promise to spend the rest of their lives together. One participant mentioned that marriage involves oaths that must be honored:

P2: “*Naghimo baya kag oath sa kuan ‘kahit anong mangyari, kamatayan lang talaga ang maghihiwalay sa atin.’ ‘Till death do us part.’*” (You made an oath that 'whatever happens, only death will separate us.' 'Till death do us part.')

Another participant mentioned that marriage begins a meaningful chapter in life, in which one vows to accompany someone for life:

P5: “*So umm, marriage, for me, is a turning point in life, where a new and meaningful chapter, where two parts unite and vow to share a life together...*” (So, marriage, for me, is a turning point in life, where a new and meaningful chapter, where two parts unite and vow to share a life together...)

Their responses reinforce the perception that marriage is lifelong, as it involves a promise that binds individuals for life, with death being the only thing that can separate them. Although the content of the vow varies among couples, one thing is certain, and that is that legal documents are signed. As marriage in the Philippines is a permanent union under the Family Code, these documents serve to legalize it. However, legalizing a marriage in the Philippines involves more than just the couple signing the documents. According to PSAHelpline (2025), for a marriage to be legally valid, it must be solemnized by an authorized person; both parties must be legally capable of marrying; a valid marriage license must be issued; the marriage contract must be signed by the couple, witnesses, and solemnizing officer; and it must be properly registered with the local civil registry. This vow of a lifetime is not only symbolically significant but also involves multiple legal and procedural requirements, making marriage a process that demands considerable effort and reflects the depth of commitment and love toward the person one intends to marry.

Subtheme 3. Requiring commitment, honesty, and loyalty: However, marriage would not be lifelong if each partner does not continually choose the other, even during difficult times. Marriage is an obligation to remain monogamous and requires commitment, honesty, and loyalty. The participants emphasized this:

P4: “*Kay dapat, para nako if mag su’d na gyud kag ingana fully committed na gyud.*” (Because for me, if you enter into something like that, you should be fully committed.)

P5: “[*Marriage*] *symbolize love, commitment and promise to stand by each other through all circumstances.*” ([*Marriage*] symbolizes love, commitment and promise to stand by each other through all circumstances.)

P6: “*I believe marriage should be built with honesty and loyalty between sa mag partners...*” (I believe marriage should be built with honesty and loyalty between partners...)

Evident from the participants’ responses is the understanding that because marriage is lifelong, it requires commitment at its very foundation. Marital commitment is essential, as it plays a crucial role in maintaining the continuity of a healthy marriage, and its absence leads to the destruction of the union (Nemati et al., 2022). Honesty, loyalty, and the willingness to stand by the promise to remain together through all circumstances are all expressions of this commitment. The participants recognize that marriage requires commitment from both the individual and one’s partner to embody love and uphold the union.

Theme 3. Fearsome: Although marriage is perceived positively by the participants, it is also a source of fear. It is seen as something fearsome. There is a clear expression of anxiety toward the idea of marriage, especially because they were conceived through an extramarital affair. The awareness that marriage can be fragile, coupled with the fact that they themselves are living examples of such fragility, makes them anxious about the possibility of experiencing the same outcome. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) anxiety toward marriage due to their parents’ actions and (2) ominous myths about paternal infidelity.

Subtheme 1. Anxiety with marriage due to parents’ action: There is anxiety surrounding the idea of marriage because, although it is associated with many positive aspects, there are also instances in which it does not work. This perception stems from being a product of their parents’ extramarital affair. The participants mentioned:

P1: “*Sa edad nako nga 37 single pa ko. Kay ngano? Mahadlok ko. Mahadlok ko kay feeling nako kay kuan man gud kanang basin ana ba arrangement... ma-ana bitaw.*” (At 37, I’m still single. Why? I’m afraid. I’m afraid

because I feel like... it might be that kind of arrangement... I might end up like that.)

P6: “*Seeing what happened to my parents made me cautious about [the] idea if ever na ako maoy kaslon in the near future.*” (Seeing what happened to my parents made me cautious about [the] idea if ever I get married in the near future.)

P7: “*There are times na maka huna huna ko na kanang nindot na kaayo ma kasal pero with sa experience gani nila mama ug papa kay mahadlok ko mosud sa usa ka butang na... kay naa pud diay chance na maguba gani siya.*” (There are times when I think that getting married would be really nice, but with the experience of my mom and dad, I'm afraid to enter into that... because there's also a chance that it might fall apart.)

The responses of illegitimate children who are a product of an affair, compared to a local study focused on legitimate children who witnessed their parents’ extramarital affair (Batara et al., 2020), show minimal differences. Both groups approach marriage with caution. However, unlike legitimate children who, after witnessing such experiences, may reject the idea of marriage altogether, illegitimate children born from an affair remain open to marriage but approach it carefully, prioritizing partner selection and deliberating on compatibility to increase the likelihood of a successful union.

Subtheme 2. Ominous myths about paternal infidelity: However, beyond their parents’ actions being a source of fear toward marriage, there are also circulating myths about karma that supposedly affect not the father who committed infidelity but his daughter, which intensifies this fear. A participant mentioned this:

P6: “*And kuan, having been a product of affair myself, mura gyud ko’g mahadlok gani kay naa man gud na’y kanang tuo-tuo sa mga tigulang nga if kanang imoha nga papa kay nagbinoang unya naay anak nga babae, anha sa anak nga babae ma kuan gani ang gaba. And I've been cautious about that. Mao to.*” (And, having been a product of an affair myself, I'm really afraid because there's a superstition among the elders that if your father misbehaves and has a daughter, the karma will fall on the daughter. And I've been cautious about that. That's why.)

Ominous myths about the karma of a father’s infidelity being directed toward his daughter create fear and contribute to the participants’ fear of marriage. Fortunately, there is no data to support these claims, and they remain myths. These kinds of beliefs, however, allow us to glimpse the culture and society that shape the experiences of children born out of an affair. The children involved are made to feel accountable for their parents’ actions, even though they have no control over the circumstances.

Table 2. Perception of Infidelity of an Individual who is a Product of an Affair

Themes	Subthemes
Unacceptable	An act of hypocrisy Disdain towards individuals who cheat
Harmful to the Marital Family	Inflicts emotional harm on the spouse Shatters a family
Negatively Impacts the Children Involved	Legitimate children witnessing the collapse of their family Illegitimate children facing social stigma due to birth circumstance

Table 2 presents the perceptions of infidelity among individuals who are products of an affair. The overarching themes identified are (1) unacceptable, (2) harmful to the marital family, and (3) negatively impacts the children involved.

Theme 1. Unacceptable: The participants perceive marriage as something that is unacceptable. There is a consistent notion from their data that engaging in such acts is heavily shunned. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) an act of hypocrisy and (2) disdain towards individuals who cheat.

Subtheme 1. An act of hypocrisy: It is established from the data that the participants perceive marriage as an act grounded in love, a promise undertaken to spend the rest of one's life together and remain committed. Hence, committing infidelity is viewed as an act of hypocrisy, as it directly violates the vow of exclusivity and devotion made during marriage. A participant expressed this:

P7: "*Lainan ko mag- lainan ko maghuna-huna nga kanang ni enter ka ana nga relationship kanang gi-himo nimo tanang measures para makasal, gasto ka tapos ma kuan diay naa diay possibility nga imo- imohang partner or ikaw kay mo enter diay kag laing relationship.*" (I feel disgusted—I feel disgusted thinking that you entered into that relationship, that you took all measures to get married, you spent money, and then there's a possibility that your partner or you might enter another relationship.)

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines hypocrisy as behavior that contradicts what one claims to believe or feel. Thus, as emphasized in the participant's response, committing infidelity after going through all the effort to marry and publicly demonstrate love constitutes hypocrisy. A participant's expression of disgust toward infidelity shows that, despite being a product of such, they do not condone the behavior and regard it as unacceptable.

Subtheme 2. Disdain towards individuals who cheat: Some participants expressed strong disdain toward individuals who cheat, condemning both the act and those who engage in it. The participants mentioned this sentiment with evident disapproval:

P1: "*Kanang mga cheater!!! Boyshet kaayo.*" (Those cheaters!!! Bullshit.)

P4: "*Unsa'y pangan ana uy, ekis! Di gyud maayo bisag- di gyud maayo i-konsinte.*" (What's that called, ugh, cross it out! It's really not good, even—it's really not good to condone.)

Although the participants were products of an affair, their responses demonstrated disdain toward both the act of infidelity and its perpetrators. Consistent with their positive perceptions of marriage, their data reveal a contrasting negative attitude toward infidelity.

Theme 2. Harmful to the Marital Family: More than being seen as unacceptable, infidelity is also perceived as harmful to the marital family. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) inflicts emotional harm on the spouse and (2) shatters a family.

Subtheme 1. Inflicts emotional harm on the spouse: The pain infidelity causes is profound; the once-perceived lifelong partner who served as a safe haven becomes a source of pain. The participants noted this:

P1: "*Kana bitaw murag dula-dula ang ilaha. Nya ang feelings, wala sila kabalo sa feelings sa ilahang kuan binuhatan bitaw.*" (It's like they're just playing around. And the feelings, they don't know how the other feels about what they've done.)

P4: "*Luoy kaayo ang pikas side kay ma kuan man, if mag cheat luoy kaayo ang pikas side if mao'y na cheatan.*" (The partner is so pitiful, because if one cheats the partner is so pitiful if they're the one who got cheated on.)

A participant mentioned that committing infidelity is particularly harmful because it involves betrayal by the person least expected to cause pain, someone who once vowed to be faithful:

P5: "*Then, when infidelity happen, like when extramarital affairs occur, like, I see them as deeply wrong, and inhumane gyud, like, how can someone still engage with another person when they have already vowed to be faithful to their partner, like doing so betrays the one who loves and serves you genuinely gani...*" (Then, when infidelity happens, like when extramarital affairs occur, like, I see them as deeply wrong, and inhumane, like,

how can someone still engage with another person when they have already vowed to be faithful to their partner, like doing so betrays the one who loves and serves you genuinely...)

These perceptions are not unfounded, as a Western study has found that infidelity causes stress, heartache, and can be potentially traumatic (Rokach & Chan, 2023). Such consequences reinforce the notion that committing infidelity causes emotional harm to the spouse, particularly when one has fully entrusted their partner to honor their vow and has fulfilled their own part of the commitment.

Subtheme 2. Shatters a family: Infidelity not only inflicts emotional harm but also shatters the family created through marriage. A participant mentioned this:

P6: *“Once those are broken, it becomes very difficult to rebuild the relationship that has lost. And infidelity shows a lack of respect, not only for the partner, but also for the family nga, ilaha nga gi build together, and if ever nga naa sila’y anak, luoy gyud kaayo ang anak kay, ang ilahang family kay na, destroyed tungod ra ana nga panandalian nga kuan ra gani, ginhawa or something.”* (Once those are broken, it becomes very difficult to rebuild the lost relationship. Infidelity shows a lack of respect, not only for the partner, but also for the family they built together. If there are children, the children are very pitiful because their family is destroyed due to a momentary lapse or something.)

Infidelity can severely damage a loving romantic relationship, often leading to its breakdown (Rokach & Chan, 2023). The fact that such harm results from the pursuit of momentary pleasure, yet carries long-lasting consequences, highlights the selfishness of the person who commits the act. This helps explain why infidelity is strongly condemned in society, particularly within the family-centered Filipino community.

Theme 3. Negatively Impacts the Children Involved: Infidelity not only affects the spouse but also the children involved. The participants highlighted how complicated these situations are for children. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) legitimate children witnessing the collapse of their family and (2) illegitimate children facing social stigma due to birth circumstances.

Subtheme 1. Legitimate children witnessing the collapse of their family: The participants acknowledge that it is painful for their legitimate counterparts to witness the collapse of their family due to a parent’s infidelity. Participants mentioned the following:

P5: *“So, like mao gyud pinaka pait, nag cheat naka– naka cheat ka, naka guba kag like both sa imohang umm–child, umm, let’s say ang child sa legal, legal marriage gani, sakit naman gani na’g mahibaw-an imong papa naay kabit...”* (So, like, that’s the most bitter part. You cheated—you cheated, you destroyed both [your marriage and spouse], and as for the child, let’s say child from legal marriage—it’s really painful to find out your father has a mistress...)

P7: *“And then even though sa katong anak sa sulod sa marriage kay mura ganig sila maka-feel, ang security na na feel gani nila inside the family kay medyo mahugno gani kay makabaw sila na naa diay other children aside from them tapos basta compli- komplikado jud kaayo siya.”* (And then, even those children within the marriage might feel that the security they felt inside the family might somewhat crumble because they found out there are other children aside from them, and it’s just very complicated.)

Children who witness a parent’s infidelity have been widely studied. Both local and foreign research shows that parental infidelity causes emotional pain and long-term psychological effects, shaping children’s perceptions of marriage and often leading to maladaptive coping strategies (Salih & Chaudry, 2021; Batara et al., 2020; Magpantay et al., 2024). Thus, the participants’ view that it is pitiful for the children to witness their family fall apart is supported by empirical evidence. Beyond this empirical support, however, is the participants’ genuine empathy for children whose families’ collapse could have been prevented had the parent honored their marital vows.

Subtheme 2. Illegitimate children facing social stigma due to birth circumstance: The participants also mentioned that illegitimate children who are products of an affair experience social stigma, despite having no control over the circumstances of their birth:

P5: *“How much more if naay bata nga involved out of in-ana extramarital affair. Kay ang mo carry man gud sa pain ana, dili ra man gud ang parents alone... but by the child who had no choice sa situation, what makes even more heart breaking is that the child often suffer man gyud. Like ang mga bata gyud nga products sa affair mao’y grabe ang consequence sa parents na action. Kay mo face sila’g bully, bullying, discrimination and unfair gani nga blame from others. Despite being innocent, the child bears the weight of a mistake they did not commit, [and] become a silent victim of their parents’ wrongdoing.”* (How much more if there's a child involved out of such an extramarital affair. Because the one who carries the pain isn't just the parents alone, but by the child who had no choice in the situation. What makes it even more heartbreaking is that the child often suffers. Like, the children who are products of an affair really bear the severe consequences of their parents' actions. Because they face bullying, discrimination, and unfair blame from others. Despite being innocent, the child bears the weight of a mistake they did not commit, becoming a silent victim of their parents' wrongdoing.)

P5: *“Luoy kaayo ang product of affair kay although innocent gani siya pero siya mismo i-blame. Like, ‘eehh ah papa man nimo– mama nimo nangabit, papa nimo kabit, kabit mama nimo kabit’ in-ana. Luoy kaayo kay like, ngano kusog man kaayo mo manangil sa mga bata ngano inyong in-anaon nga wala man sila’y gi buhat unta nga sala.”* (But the product of an affair is truly pitiful because even though they are innocent, they themselves are blamed. Like, 'eehh, your father—your mother cheated, your father is a mistress, your mother is a mistress'—like that. It's truly pitiful because, like, why are they so quick to accuse children, why do they do that when they haven't done anything wrong?)

P7: *“Umm, having an affair outside marriage tapos nag involve pa gyud siya’g mga bata is very complicated jud and very painful for both nga kanang for the persons involved. Sa mga bata makahatag sila, makahatag ni siya og kanang embarassment tapos ma involve gyud sila sa pagpanaway sa society imbis na bisan na kanang anak sila- anak ra sila sa naghimo.”* (Umm, having an affair outside marriage and then involving children is very complicated and very painful for both—for the persons involved. For the children, it can cause embarrassment and they will be involved in society's criticism, even though they are just children of those who did it.)

From the perspectives shared by the participants, it is clear that their views are anchored in the locality's societal standards. Local studies have also noted that illegitimate children often face social stigma and feelings of shame, despite having done nothing wrong (Engo et al., 2022). Beyond social stigma, however, there are legal disadvantages that directly affect them. Although Article 195 of the Family Code of the Philippines obliges parents to provide support to their illegitimate children, Article 895 of the Civil Code grants them only half of their parental inheritance, and these only take effect if the father legally recognizes the child. These laws highlight how, from birth, illegitimate children are placed at a disadvantage.

Table 3. Family Dynamics of an Individual Who Is a Product of an Affair

Themes	Subthemes
Distant Relationship Caused by Separation	<p>Hesitant openness with a mother who worked far from home</p> <p>Feeling awkward with a father who was not around growing up</p> <p>Little to no connection with half-siblings raised in separate households</p>
Close Relationship Formed Through Shared Living	<p>Attachment to substitute parental figures</p> <p>Experience of a traditional household with cohabiting parents</p> <p>Close bonds with full and/or half sibling/s raised in the same household</p>

Acceptance from Peripheral Extended Family	Birth circumstance being overlooked Seen as innocent from their parents' action
Exclusion from Family	Discrimination from extended family Abandoned by biological parents

Table 3 presents the family dynamics among individuals who are products of an affair. The overarching themes identified are (1) distant relationship caused by separation, (2) close relationships formed through shared living, (3) acceptance from peripheral extended family, and (4) exclusion from family.

Theme 1. Distant Relationship Caused by Separation: Data on participants' family dynamics revealed that the absence of certain family members during their formative years led to distant relationships. Highlighting these dynamics is important because they reflect the quality of the participants' connections with their family members. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) hesitant openness with a mother who worked far from home, (2) feeling awkward with a father who was not around growing up, and (3) little to no connection with half-siblings raised in separate households.

Subtheme 1. Hesitant openness with a mother who worked far from home: Mothers are least likely to disengage from their parental role, as they have carried and given birth to the child. As a result, if the father is not around to provide financial support, the mother becomes the one who provides for the family, taking on the breadwinning role. And when work opportunities require them to be far from home, this creates distance in the relationship. Participants mentioned this:

P2: *“Oo, nagraise nako si mama ra gyud sa financial. Kay naa man gyud koy- hinglola baya ko. Kay si mama naa man magtrabaho sa city then naa ko ni lola gyud nagdako.”* (Yes, my mother financially raised me. I am fond of my grandmother. Since my mother worked in the city, and I grew up with my grandmother.)

P2: *“In terms of mga problema kay di gyud nako i-share ni mama. Murag si mama kay di man gud siya makasabot nako kay wala man gud ko niya nagkuan [nagdako].”* (In terms of problems, I really don't share them with my mother. It's like my mother doesn't understand me because she wasn't there when I was growing up.)

P7: *“Ahh, growing up kay layo gyud si mama sa amoa since nga ni ari mi diri sa Cebu kay wala man siya ni kuyog namo gud. So uh wala kaayo koy tarong na bond, emotional bond or some kind of connection ka mama gyud.”* (Ahh, growing up, my mom was really far from us because when we came here to Cebu, she didn't come with us. So, uh, I didn't really have a proper bond, emotional bond or some kind of connection with my mom.)

However, this does not mean that this distant relationship cannot be repaired. Although some participants grew up with their mothers being away for work, one participant shared how their relationship slowly rebuilt over time:

P2: *“Ako biological mom, okay ra man kaayo [amo relationship]. Like mura ra sa'g sa pagkawala ni lola, murag siyay na gyud nagkuan na if naa ko'y kinahanglan siya nay magluto-luto nako [inig] mag-eskwela usahay. Si mama na gyud ang tanan tanan. Kay unlike atong naa pa si lola, kay si lola nag-aroga nako iyang mama [ni mama], ang support lang gyud ni mama kay financial. Si lola tanan sa emotional, sa pag-gamo ana tanan. Nya pagkawala na ni lola, si mama na gyud ang nagkuan. Gibiyaan iyang trabaho ug nibalhin siya para maalagaan mi niya, kami duha sa akong magulang.”* (My biological mom, our relationship is very okay. It's like after my grandmother passed away, she became the one who provides for my needs such as cooking for me sometimes when I'm going to school. My mother is really everything now. Unlike when my grandmother was still here, my grandmother—my mother's mother—took care of me; my mother's support was only financial. My grandmother handled all the emotional support and care. Then, after my grandmother was gone, my mother took over everything. She left her job and moved to take care of us, my older sibling and me.)

Although one participant was given the opportunity to repair their mother–child relationship, the duration was too short to build a deep connection, and to this day, hesitation in being open with their mother continues to persist:

P7: “*Recently lang gyud mi nagka-bond katong ni adto gani ko sa [L], pero kadiyot ra pud to siya kay nibalik man ko sa- nibalik man ko diri kay I think I belong here gyud sa Cebu... during that time kay nakaila pud nako ’g tarong gani si mama and then umm nagkaduna gyud mi ’g time with each other pero I don’t think na kato na connection gani kay deep enough gani na mo share ko sa iyaha sa mga nahitabo sa akoo ing-ana gani. Feel nako strange, umm, feel nako strange kaayo sa akoo na naa ko’y mama since nagdako gud ko na wala siya gani.*” (We only recently bonded when I went to [L], but it was short because I came back—I came back here because I think I really belong here in Cebu... during that time, I really got to know my mom properly, and then, umm, we really had time with each other, but I don't think that connection was deep enough for me to share with her what was happening to me. I feel strange, umm, I feel very strange having a mom since I grew up without her.)

The bond between a child and their mother during upbringing profoundly influences the child’s sense of self-worth, relationships, and future pursuits, shaping nearly every aspect of life (Miernik, 2023). However, this mother–child bond may not always exist during upbringing. In the case of illegitimate children born from an affair, there are instances when the mother must work far from home, where opportunities exist to provide for the family, particularly when the father is absent. This often leaves the children in the care of relatives. This affects the bond between mother and child, as growing up far from one another weakens their relationship. This finding is supported by a Chinese study showing that separation weakens mother-child relationships (Liang & Van Leeuwen, 2024). However, there have been instances where their relationship rekindled, particularly when they were once again in close proximity, as evidenced by the findings of this study.

Subtheme 2. Feeling awkward with a father who was not around growing up: However, distance affects not only the mother–child relationship but also the father–child relationship. The participants described their interactions with their fathers, which highlight the distant relationship between them:

P2: “*Naa mi contact [ni papa]. Naa ko contact. Pero dili kaayo as in na mura gyud og papa nga nakauban nimo sukad-sukad. Mura ra ’g- ako ra’y pangamustahan, dili ko mangamusta nila. Sila maoy mangamusta nako.*” (I have contact [with my father]. I have contact. But it's not really like a father you've been with since forever. It's more like—they're the ones who check up on me, I don't check up on them. They're the ones who check up on me.)

P2: “*Wala man kay mi close bond [sa ako biological father]. Wala man gani mi nagbonding or somewhat like unsa na. Pero kaila nako nya kaila pud siya nako. Mo bless ko niya as formality, as respect lang gyud kaayo ba.*” (I didn't have a close bond [with my biological father]. We didn't even bond or anything like that. But I know him, and he knows me. I do the act of *bless* (an act of respecting elders in the Filipino culture) to him as formality, just as an act of respecting elders.)

P7: “*And then for my father, most of the time gani sa akoo na- sa akoang childhood years kay wala gyud si papa kay trabaho man siya sa [N] gyud. So wala sad kaayo mi kuan gani, mo uli siya every 2 weeks man and then mo stay ra siya pila ka days. Tapos ana kay dili gani kaayo kanang, dili gyud gani nako ma ingon na connected mi although kay harmonized ra kaayo mi sa balay nuon. Tapos strict man gud to si papa tapos organized, dapat kani dapat kana ing-ana gani, so more no kung naa gani siya kay mura ’g- mura ko ’g ma dili ko at ease gani. Dili pareha anang sa normal gyud na kuan na tawag gani... kanang at ease ka if naa si papa ug si mama nimo in-ana gani.*” (And then for my father, most of the time during my childhood years, my father wasn't really there because he worked in [N]. So we didn't really have much, he would come home every 2 weeks and then stay for a few days. And then it wasn't really—I can't really say we were connected, although we were very harmonized at home. And then my father was strict and organized, it should be this, it should be that, so more often than not, when he was there, I would feel—I wouldn't feel at ease. It's not like in a normal situation... where you feel at ease when your father and mother are there.)

A participant also reported similar findings to those observed in the mother–child relationship. When proximity increases, such as living together in the same household for an extended period, the bond improves:

P4: “*Akoa kay... Sa karun kay akoang papa nauli naman wala naman nag abroad, mao na ma kuan nako okay ra.*” (As for me... now my father has come home, he's no longer abroad, so our relationship is okay.)

Just like the mother-child relationship, as evidenced by the findings, the father-child relationship can also be fostered if fathers spend more time with their children and remain close in proximity, which helps build stronger bonds. This leads us to infer that being absent during a child's formative years does not permanently define the relationship. What matters is the effort the parent makes to make up for the time lost. Parent–child relationships can be mended, especially when the parent spends extended time with the child, and they are able to bond together.

Subtheme 3. Little to no connection with half-siblings raised in separate households: However, this distance not only affects parent–child relationships but also extends to sibling relationships, particularly with half-siblings raised in separate households. Participants mentioned that although they were aware of the existence of their half-siblings, they had little to no interaction with them:

P2: “*Nya sa akong papa, ako maoy kinamagulangan. Naa ko'y duha kabuok manghod. Kana ako mga manghod kay mo adto ra ko didto, mo bless ra sila nako. Dili- wala kaayo mi mga interaction-interaction.*” (And on my father's side, I am the eldest. I have two younger siblings. As for my younger siblings, whenever I go there, they just do the act of *bless* (an act to show respect for elders in the Filipino culture) to me. We don't—we don't have much interaction.)

P4: “*Sa... sa side sa akong mama kay dili. Dili, wala mi ga kuan, wala mi contact.*” (On... on my mother's side, no. No, we don't—we don't have contact.)

P7: “*So talking about sa akong relationship sa akong mga igsuon kay umm na met ra nako sila online kay naa man gud sila- ang usa naa sa [M], ang usa naa sa [N], naa sa [L], layo gani mi.*” (So, talking about my relationship with my siblings, umm, I only met them online because they are—one is in [M], one is in [V], one is in [L], we're far apart.)

A participant, although told that she had many half-siblings, never knew who they were. However, she eventually met one of them and had the chance to bond with him. She mentioned that they now have an okay relationship:

P6: “*And, sa papa nga side kay daghan man daw kuno mi pero ang akoa rang nailhan kay usa gani kuan kanang same age bracket ra pod nako kuan, lalaki, and nagkaila mi mga senior high, and kuan among relationship ron kay okay ra man mag bonding ra sad mi usahay gyud.*” (And, on my father's side, they say there are many of us, but the only one I know is one who is in the same age bracket as me, a boy, and we met in senior high, and our relationship now is okay, we sometimes bond.)

The findings that distance weakens relationships and proximity helps mend them apply not only to parent-child relationships but also to sibling relationships. However, while their relationship quality may improve, they will never experience the kind of upbringing found in traditional households, with parents around during childhood and siblings being raised together. These dynamics arise from the circumstances of their birth and the complexities of their family structure, shaping relationships in ways that differ from traditional family experiences.

Theme 2. Close Relationship Formed Through Shared Living: Although some participants were unable to build a close relationship with their immediate biological family due to distance, others were fortunate to develop strong bonds with their biological family or with individuals they treated as immediate family. This quality of close relationships often stems from growing up with these people being around. The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) attachment to parental figures, (2) experience of a traditional household with cohabiting parents, and (3) close bonds with full and/or half sibling/s raised in the same household.

Subtheme 1. Attachment to substitute parental figures: Previous data revealed that, due to the complexities of being born out of an affair, some participants did not grow up being raised by their biological parents. Fortunately, individuals stepped in and assumed parental roles, leading participants to form attachments to these caregivers rather than to their biological parents. There were participants who mentioned being raised by kin; some specifically mentioned being raised by their grandparents:

P1: “*Akong lola baya ang nagpadako nako. Mother’s side. Kay didto gyud baya ko gibilin ni mama pag-6 months old pa ko... Akong lolo kay dili man kakita- naa siya. Silang duha nag-raise nako.*” (My grandmother was the one who raised me... My grandfather can’t see- but he’s there. The two of them raised me.)

P6: “*Akong grandparents man mao’y nag patubo gani nako, kay silang duha nga ginikanan kay nag trabaho sad sa city. So mao to nga sa akoa gyud grandparents ko ni depend and even without my kuan father’s presence akong childhood kay mura’g complete man gihapon uy kay naa ra gyud ang kanang akong pamilya nga nag love nako unconditionally.*” (My grandparents are the ones who raised me, because both my parents are working in the city. That’s why I really depended on my grandparents and even without my father’s presence during my childhood it felt complete because my family was there to love me unconditionally.)

P7: “*Since nagdako man ko nila, sila lola ug lolo man gyud ang nagpadako nako sa akoa so I- kato- kato sa ilahang pagpadako kay feel nako is kanang sila lang mura gani ang nisalo sa responsibilities nila mama ug papa since need pud nila motrabaho para maka sustain sa amoa...*” (Since I grew up with them, my grandfather and my grandmother were the ones who raised me I- the- the way they have raised me made me feel as though they have carried the responsibilities of my mother and father since the two of them need to work to sustain us...)

There were also some who mentioned being raised by their aunt and uncles:

P2: “*Like kato. Mo to naa ko’y papa-papa, silbi naa ko’s ako ig-agaw... Ana sila- ana si lola nga di daw ko mo totoy’g bibiron, adto daw ko mo totoy sa akong iyaan. Asawa sa akong uyoan ba. Adto kuno ko mo totoy. Mao na nga mag mama [redacted] ko ug papa [redacted].*” (Like I mentioned. I have a father figure, I have one from my cousin... They said- my grandmother said that I would not feed on the baby bottle, I would feed on my aunt, the wife of my uncle. That was where I fed. That’s the reason I call them mama [redacted] and papa [redacted].)

P2: “*Nya si lola kay- usa ra man [ko] balay nilang lola, nya ilaha pu’ng balay duol ra (implies aunt and uncle’s) , magtapon-tapon ra ko. Mura ra’g na normal nako, mura pu’g feel nako complete ako pamilya, naa ra ko’y mama’g papa.*” (And for my grandmother- I lived with them, then their house (implies aunt and uncle’s) was also nearby, I just went whenever. This set-up feels normal to me, it felt like I had a complete family, I had a mother and a father.)

P4: “*Akong duha gud ka ginikanan akong mama’g papa kay abroad. Nya silbi ga dako ko sa ig-suon sa akong papa. Nya akong auntie. Nya didto raman ko gyud ko ga dako nga kuan... kanang grateful kaayo kay mao na, kay naa sila papa didto sa gawas unya naa ra gihapo’y naka atiman nako in ana ba.*” (Both my mother and father are abroad. I grew up with the young sibling of my father. My aunt. And there I grew up... I feel really grateful because as my parents are abroad there was someone who took care of me.)

P7: “*Ah, si auntie nako mao ni siya, si auntie nako katong ig-suon ni papa si auntie [redacted] kay mao jud ni siya na nidako na mama-mama nako. So kung man kanang mangutana ko if or naa ko mapangutana kay sakto bani akong pagsul-ob sa sinina, or unsaon ni mga binabaye gani na mga things kay mo duol ra gyud ko ni- si auntie ra gyud ang naga guide sa akoa about ing-ana...*” (Ah, my auntie that’s one, my auntie the sibling of my father, auntie [redacted] was the one I saw growing up as my mother figure. So whenever I have questions regarding the proper way of wearing a shirt, or whatever girly stuff it is I go to her- my auntie was the one who guided me through such things...)

Another participant mentioned experiencing parental love from non-kin:

P1: *“Paghig-school na nako. Enter nako ’g first year high-school, nagworking student ko sa akoang maestro ug maestra then didto nako ni gishare tanan. So pagshare nako tanan sa akoga ’ng whole gyud na story, silay nay nagfulfill sa kuan- sila na’y ni fulfill- giparamdam nila sa akoga nga naa koy amahan, naa koy inahan. As in kanang pinangga kayko nila. Pero dili siya ingon nga na spoiled ko ha. Like gitraining ko nila sa kana bitaw practical life, ila ko gitraining unsa’y mga dapat kuan sa balay. So didto ko na mold tanan. Tanan bisa’g trabahoon sa balay kaya nako... inana. Mao ko nagmaestro, sila pud nag-influence sa akoga.”* (When I was in high school. When I entered first year high school, I was a working student for my teachers and there I have shared everything. So after I shared my whole story, they were the ones to fulfill- they have fulfilled- they made me feel as though I have a father, I have a mother. They really did love me. But not to the point I was spoiled. They trained me on practical life, they trained me on household chores. There I was molded on everything. Any jobs surrounding the house I can do it... This is also the reason I want to be a teacher, they were the influences.)

P1: *“Massage therapist ko dayon pagkuan nako dira nako nakaila ang uyuan ni [redacted] which is naglonging pud siya og anak. Kay iyang mga anak naa sa abroad. 26 years old gi-adopt ko sa uyuan ni [redacted]. Siya na’y nagpaeskwela nako ’g college. Dayon mao to ni graduate ko.”* (I was a massage therapist and that was when I met the uncle of [redacted] who was also longing for a child. This is because his children are abroad. At 26 years old I was adopted by the uncle of [redacted]. He was the one who supported me in college. Then I graduated.)

The participants’ experiences clearly demonstrate that, even without their biological parents present, children can grow up well if there are individuals fulfilling parental roles. They reported feeling a sense of having a complete family thanks to these individuals and expressed deep gratitude toward those who were there, shaping their upbringing. The Institute for Educational Advancement (2022) stated that since parents form the child’s primary social group, the parent–child relationship has a profound impact on every aspect of the child’s later life. However, as the findings from this study show, individuals born from an affair often did not grow up with their biological parents. Fortunately, kin were present to care for the children. Kinship care is an arrangement in which children are placed in the care of grandparents, aunts, uncles, or other relatives connected by blood, marriage, or adoption (Koh et al., 2024). For individuals who are products of an affair, this arrangement often becomes necessary because their parents are unavailable, with reasons ranging from career obligations to abandonment. Having kin, especially grandparents, take responsibility for raising their grandchildren when the parents are unavailable is not uncommon in Filipino families (Uy & Sadang, 2020). With these relatives serving as surrogate parents, the participants reported feeling as though they grew up in a complete family despite being far from their parents. However, it is not only kin who can act as surrogate parents. There has also been a case of those who were supported and treated like family by non-kin. Family does not always have to be blood-related; sometimes it is chosen (Blehart, 2020). The deepest sense of belonging comes from those who choose to care.

Subtheme 2. Experience of a traditional household with cohabiting parents: There are also instances in which an extramarital affair results in the parents cohabiting, living much like a traditional nuclear family. In these cases, the parents fulfill traditional parental roles. One participant mentioned:

P5: *“My relationship with both my mother and father growing up was quite good ra gyud siya, like typical parent-child relationship, like they took care of me and guiding me the best they could in-ana, and felt their love and presence throughout the childhood.”* (My relationship with both my mother and father growing up was quite good, like a typical parent-child relationship, like they took care of me and guided me the best they could, and I felt their love and presence throughout childhood.)

Another participant, raised in a household with cohabiting parents, also mentioned that he has a parent he favors, particularly when it comes to opening up:

P3: *“Ana man gyud ko niya mo open mo istorya ni mama kay ni papa di man kaayo ko mo kuan og storya, dili kaayo showy ba.”* (I opened up to her. She’s the one I open up to because with my dad I do not really open up to him, not really showy.)

This preference for mothers may stem from men's emotional distance, as openness and affection are not traditionally seen as masculine traits (Dekin, 2020). Regardless of birth circumstances, mothers are generally preferred due to the amount of time spent with their children (Dy-Zulueta, 2024), and the bond already formed in the womb and further strengthened as the child grows. In contrast, fathers, who are not part of that prenatal bond, develop relationships with their children later and in different ways. In the Philippines, a mother is often called the *ilaw ng tahanan* (light of the household) because her presence brings warmth and guidance to her children (Tiamzon-Abiera, 2024). Fathers, on the other hand, are referred to as the *haligi ng tahanan* (pillar of the house), as they are the family's primary providers (Dalis, 2024). When parents cohabit, these roles are generally fulfilled, reflecting the traditional division of parental responsibilities.

Subtheme 3. Close bonds with full and/or half sibling/s raised in the same household: If a parent-child relationship can be strengthened simply by being present during a child's upbringing, the same is true for sibling relationships. Participants mentioned feeling close to their full siblings, largely because they were more likely to have been raised together:

P7: “[*Sa full sibling nako*] close gyud mi ato niya ka’y nagdako man gud mi na kauban gani mi tapos kanang kami gyud magka dula gani, althroughout sa amoang mga childhood years so dungan mi na mo memorize og kanta ing-ana gani so close jud kaayo although mag sige mig away, sige mig sumbagay gani, maka ana gyud ko na close gyud among- mas close gud mi. Siguro if e compare nako kay mas close mi sa akong manghud kaysa nila papa ug nila mama jud. Kami ni [redacted].” ([With my full sibling] we're really close because we grew up together and we played together throughout our childhood years, so we would memorize songs together, like that, so we're really close even though we always fight, we always punch each other, I can really say we're close—we're closer. Maybe if I compare it, I'm closer to my younger sibling than to my father and mother. It's just me and [redacted].)

In instances where half-siblings are raised together, participants described feeling as though they were traditional siblings:

P2: “*Nya naa man ko nagkuan sa akong mama, silbi mura’g nakuan nako nga tinuod na igsuon ang akong magulang. Silbi kauban mi’g puyo man. Usahay- most of the time okay pero naa gyud time nga di jud mi magkasinabot. Kay lagi nang dili mi [parehag] gigikanan ba. Nya lahi siya, dili mi pareha’g papa. Mao na. Pero magkasinabot gyud mi kay kami ra gud pud duha.*” (And I was with my mom, so it's like I considered my older sibling a true sibling. We lived together. Sometimes—most of the time it's okay, but there are times when we really don't get along. Because we don't have the same origin. And he's different, we don't have the same father. That's it. But we really get along because it's just the two of us.)

P3: “*Close, close ra gyud siyaman mura’g ra gani’g siya kana ganing mura ra gyud mi’g normal na brother na mura’g dili na half ba.*” (We're really close, it's like he's just like a normal brother, not really a half-sibling.)

P4: “*Pero sa akong papa kay suod gyud. Naa ra dira, sa [C]. Maguwang! Ako ma’y kinamaghuran.*” (But on my father's side, we're really close. They're just there, in [C]. Older sibling! I'm the youngest.)

In a traditional Filipino household, full siblings deeply appreciate one another and share a profound love. In this context, siblings are lifelong companions who teach conflict resolution, provide emotional support and understanding, build social skills, foster healthy competition, and create shared memories and traditions (Dizon-Reynante, 2024). Comparing traditional Filipino nuclear siblings to the complex biological siblings of individuals born from an affair, discrepancies in the relationship are most evident when siblings grow up in separate households. In cases where siblings lived together growing up, whether full or half-siblings, their relationships were described as similar to those of traditional Filipino siblings.

Theme 3. Acceptance from Peripheral Extended Family: Peripheral extended family refers to relatives with whom one is not as close. The word 'peripheral' here implies that these relatives are less central to the participants' daily lives, though they still remain part of the extended family. Reports of acceptance from these family members are important to highlight, as such acceptance influences how the participants see themselves.

The subthemes identified under this theme are (1) birth circumstances being overlooked and (2) seen as innocent from their parents' actions.

Subtheme 1. Birth circumstance being overlooked: Most participants mentioned that their extended family did not mind their birth circumstance and did not make them feel as though they're different:

P2: "*Nya i-treat ra man ko nila nga mura ra ko'g apo na permi nang kauban, nga mura'g nagtrabaho sa gawas. Kay inig mo adto ko didto, lutoan ko nila'g- ihawa'g manok. Nya magpabalo nga [mo adto kuno ko] kay aron lutoan mga lami ba, ana. Dawat ra man ko nila kung kuan [unsa] ko.*" (They treat me like a grandchild who's always with them, like someone working abroad. Because when I go there, they cook for me—they grill chicken. And they let me know [that I should go there] so they can cook delicious food, like that. They accept me for who I am.)

P3: "*Hmm, sa akong lang na part is kuan raman siya, okay raman siya kay ang mga relatives gani kay mura'g nadawat nila. Kay once gani ang imohang relatives gani mura'g dili maka dawat sa imohang identity mura ka'g e kuan, mura ka'g daog-daogon ing-ana. Pero sa akong mga relatives diha dili raman, nadawat raman pud nila...*" (Hmm, for my part, it's just okay because my relatives, it's like they've accepted me. Because once your relatives don't accept your identity, it's like you're being, you're being oppressed, like that. But my relatives there, they've accepted me...)

P5: "*Like, my grandparents and extended family treated me very well ra pud. Like they never made me feel different or judged.*" (Like, my grandparents and extended family treated me very well. Like they never made me feel different or judged.)

P7: "*Then wala ko ka feel na ila kong- na lahi ilang tan-aw sa akong...*" (Then I didn't feel like they—that they looked at me differently...)

Filipinos are widely known for their welcoming personalities, even being recognized by the BBC (n.d.) as among the friendliest people in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that extended family members accept children born from an extramarital affair. After all, Filipinos are family-centered, meaning blood relations take utmost priority.

Subtheme 2. Seen as innocent from their parents' action: The participants expressed immense gratitude for being seen as innocent despite their birth circumstances, which are condemned from both legal and religious perspectives:

P6: "*Kuan ra man, they treated us normally ra man pud. Mura ra gani'g among background kay wala gyud nag matter gani. And I'm very thankful for that 'kana bataa uy, wala man ni apil sa kanang sala gyud sa ginikanan' gani.*" (It's just, they treated us normally. It's like our background didn't really matter. And I'm very thankful for that, and it's like they probably saw that 'oh, these children are innocent, they weren't involved in the parents' sin.')

Although this interaction may seem small, it helps instill in the individual that they are not bearers of their parents' wrongdoing and remain innocent. This allows the participants to feel that there is no shame in their existence, as there are people who genuinely love and accept them.

Theme 4. Exclusion from Family: Unfortunately, some participants have experienced exclusion from family members. The subthemes in this theme are (1) discrimination from extended family and (2) abandoned by biological parents.

Subtheme 1. Discrimination from extended family: Unfortunately, Filipino extended families not only possess positive qualities but also display negative ones. Toxic aspects of Filipino culture, such as relatives openly commenting on a family member's physical appearance, career, marital status, or private affairs, can make family gatherings dreaded occasions (Baylous, 2019). Participants recalled instances in which they felt discriminated against:

P1: “*Kuan nakadungog na ba mo anang words na ‘anak sa liking kawayan?’ Mao na permi nako madungog. ‘Nya kuan sad sa akong family sad kanang madungog sad nako siya nga kuan. Sa akong family, relatives-extended- akong mga igagaw, iyaan, uyuan. Ingon sila anang kuan bitaw kanang sakit nga pulong, kana bitaw ‘anak ra ka-’, ‘anak ra ka-’ inana ba lain gyud ang kuan. Basta mura gyud siya makaguba gyud siya- og kung imo gyud siya i-absorb maguba gyud ang imoha mentality bitaw, ma inana siya.*” (Have you heard the words 'child of the split bamboo culm?' That's what I always hear. And also in my family, relatives—extended—my cousins, aunts, uncles. They say those hurtful words, like 'you're just a child of—,' 'you're just a child of—' like that, it's really different. It really destroys—if you really absorb it, it will destroy your mentality, like that.)

P7: “*Katong mga umm, medyo layo-layo na mga family members like igsuon nila lola, igsuon nila lolo kay sila mo ‘y- kana ganing mga tigulang na man gud so murag medyo mga kuan pud mura ‘g... asa diay imong mama ug papa? Mura ‘g kuan gani sila mura ‘g sila- di ko sure ha pero di sure ko if ilaha to na motive pero mura sila ‘g mo provoke gani especially during kanang gatherings sila maoy mangutana na asa na diay to sila papa nimo? Ay tungod man gud ni papa nimo maong na ing-ana na, ing-ana gani.*” (Those, umm, somewhat distant family members like grandma's siblings, grandpa's siblings, they are—because they're already old, so it's a bit, like... 'where are your mom and dad?' It's like they—I'm not sure, but I'm not sure if that was their motive, but it's like they provoke, especially during gatherings, they're the ones who ask, 'where are your parents now?' 'Oh, it's because of your dad that it's like that,' something like that.)

Discrimination from one’s own family represents another level of pain. The very people expected to accept and understand the circumstances are the ones who nitpick and remind the children of it. Such remarks have a negative psychological impact, as supported by a Nigerian study that found that discrimination, as a form of stigma, lowers self-esteem, making it harder for them to form healthy social bonds and integrate into society later in life (Soyobi et al., 2024).

Subtheme 2. Abandoned by biological parents: Data also revealed that exclusion can come not only from extended family members but even directly from biological parents. One participant recalled struggling during childhood because he was abandoned by his parents:

P1: “*Mao to so growing up nagstruggle gyud ko kay gibiyaan man gud ko sa ako mama tungod sa iyang kalagot-tungod sa iyang kalagot- mura ang kalagot niya sa akong papa diri niya gikuan [balos nako], so gibiyaan ko sa akong mama.*” (So, growing up, I really struggled because my mom left me due to her anger—her anger towards my dad, she took it out on me, so my mom left me.)

P1: “*Mao to gipanganak nako, mao to gipaila-ila ko sa akoang papa... wala ko gi- gi-reject ko niya- wala ko niya gitanggap.*” (So I was born, and I was introduced to my father... he didn't—he rejected me—he didn't accept me.)

Regardless of circumstance, abandonment remains harmful. A Place of HOPE (n.d.) defines childhood abandonment as a parent or caregiver failing to provide a child with an environment that ensures safety or adequate access to basic needs, care, attention, and support. Such abandonment can have long-term negative effects on the developing brain. Fortunately, in many cases, individuals stepped in to assume parental roles, helping mitigate the harmful effects of rejection and highlighting the crucial importance of parental figures during childhood. The presence of these supportive figures helped participants grow up relatively well-adjusted and gave them the resilience to openly discuss their experiences.

Table 4. Lived Experiences of an Individual who is a Product of an Affair

Theme	Subtheme
Societal Stigma	Hurtful Words
	Judgement

Emotional Distress	Shame, Confusion, and Low Self-Worth Loneliness and Abandonment Jealousy and Envy Resentment and Anger
Facing Legal and Inheritance Limitations	Unable to Carry the Biological Fathers Surname Limited Access to Inheritance
Seeking Social Support	Reliance on Grandparents Confiding in Friends and Partners
Learning Cognitive and Emotional Regulation	Acceptance and Reframing Developing Immunity Emotional Suppression
Utilizing Behavioral and Action-Oriented Strategies	Distraction Focusing on Personal Goals Openness Religious Faith

Table 4 presents the lived experiences of individuals who are products of an affair. The overarching themes identified are (1) societal stigma, (2) emotional distress, (3) facing legal and inheritance limitations, (4) seeking social support, (5) learning cognitive and emotional regulation, and (6) utilizing behavioral and action-oriented strategies.

Theme 1. Societal Stigma: In consequence of being a child born from an affair, the participants receive harsh remarks from people and are even stereotyped by society. Despite their position as having no control over the cause of the situation, many people in society fail to recognize that the stigma they created around these individuals, culturally constructed as based on Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory (1979), is negatively affecting them. The subthemes found under this theme are (1) hurtful words and (2) judgment.

Subtheme 1. Hurtful words: As an extension to the Cebuano term “*kabit*” – meaning "to attach" (Espiritu, 2022), directly referring to the third party in an extramarital affair, terms such as “child of sin or child of shame” (Roslan & Zul-kifli, 2022) or terms alike are used against the participants. The participants shared:

P1: “*Kuan nakadungog na ba mo anang words na ‘anak sa liking kawayan?’ Mao na permi nako madungog.*” (Have you heard the words 'child of the split bamboo culm?' That's what I always hear.)

P2: “*Walay papa.*” *Usahay ingnan pud ko walay mama kay naa sa layo si mama. Unya [mao na ila iingon] ‘walay mama’g papa.*” (“No father.” Sometimes they also tell me I have no mother because my mother is miles apart. And [that's what they say] "no mother and father.”)

Commonly, the participants receive hurtful terms or negative labels associated with their identity. These terms that are called on them are constructed idiomatically or literally delivered. In the behavioral-cultural aspect, the hurtful words or derogatory terms that illegitimate children of an affair receive served as a condemnation by

society of the affair that their parents had committed. Furthermore, these hurtful or derogatory terms received by participants have a psychological effect on them. The participants have mentioned:

P1: *“Nya kuan sad sa akong family sad kanang madungog sad nako siya nga kuan. Sa akong family, relatives-extended- akong mga igagaw, iyaan, uyuan. Ingon sila anang kuan bitaw kanang sakit nga pulong, kana bitaw ‘anak ra ka-’, ‘anak ra ka-’ inana ba lain jud ang kuan. Basta mura jud siya makaguba jud siya- og kung imo jud siya i-absorb maguba jud ang imoha mentality bitaw, ma inana siya.”* (And also in my family, relatives—extended—my cousins, aunts, uncles. They say those hurtful words, like 'you're just a child of—', 'you're just a child of—' like that, it's really different. It really destroys—if you really absorb it, it will destroy your mentality, like that.)

P2: *“Mao na “walay mama ’g papa.” Kana jud ang maka-resent nga statement kana walay mama ug papa. Nya karon kay okay ra. Independent na.”* (That one, ‘no mother and father.’ That’s the statement I resent the most. But now, it’s okay. I got independent.)

The participants suffer psychologically from the negative remarks that they receive about their identity. This is supported by what Soyobi et al. (2024) found, that stigmatization has a negative psychological effect, lowering the self-esteem of illegitimate children. And further strengthened by Engo et al. (2022), highlighting that these children experience verbal and emotional abuse from parents, bullying from peers, and social isolation by their community, which are environments and factors that take a toll on their psychological well-being.

Subtheme 2. Judgement: Participants, due to their identity, are indiscriminately perceived negatively by society. A participant mentioned:

P6: *“Kuan, for me. Society, kuan paman gihapon uy. Kanang, they see us as, kuan, unacceptable or shameful pa gani, and some people view us as burdens or reminders sa mistakes among mga parents, and it's painful to know nga some communities kay naa gihapon na nga mindset as if our existence defines us, defines our worth and kuan, kanang, we [are] often seen as, kuan gani kanang, something nga maka-tarnish sa usa ka family nga reputation which is unfair sa mga bata kay, wala baya gyud mi nag kuan nga ‘ay i-anak mi’ ing-ana, something.”* (Umm, for me. Society, it's still the same, umm. They see us as, umm, unacceptable or even shameful, and some people view us as burdens or reminders of our parents' mistakes, and it's painful to know that some communities still have that mindset as if our existence defines us, defines our worth, and umm, we [are] often seen as, umm, something that can tarnish a family's reputation, which is unfair to the children because we really didn't, umm, 'oh, bring us to this world' like that, something.)

The participants are shown to be judged by their existence as marks of disgrace of someone who is shameful and unacceptable. Participants' worth is measured by society solely on their identity as a child of an affair, disregarding their qualities and abilities as individuals. Moreover, participants are also judged on their ability to exhibit the right behaviors and develop morals. One participant shared:

P7: *“Naa gani toy kausa na kanang naa koy nahimo na bati ba, naa koy murag sa kuan man siguro to kanang nag test mi nya nag dala kog calculator ambot naunsa to siya na murag nadako gani siya pero wala pako, di pa gud ko kamao mo gamit og calculator ato as in akong malingaw ralog kuan kuan [tuplok-tuplok] gani maong nagdala kog ing-ato nya katong usa ka mother gani na nag atang pud sa iyang kuan, classmate nako ba ana sila na kanang ambot gi unsa to basta kay ilang ilang gi ingon na “ ay kuan man gud na siya, wala man gud na siyay kuan, wala man gud na shay kanang mama” ing-ana ba tapos “bulag man gud na” mura ganig ilang gi kuan na uhm wala gani koy tarong, walay tarong ni guide sa akoa kay wala si mama wala si papa and then anak pa gyud ko sa kuan sa gawas mao to ilang, murag lahi kaayo ilang tan-aw sa amoa na anak gani og ing-ana imbis na wala gani miy sala gani bunga rami ing-ana, mao rato.”* (There was even something, umm, that I did something bad, I had something, I guess it was when we had a test, and I brought a calculator, I don't know what happened, but it seemed like a big deal, but I wasn't, I didn't even know how to use a calculator then, I was just enjoying pressing buttons, that's why I brought something like that, and then another mother who was also waiting for her child child, umm, my classmate, they said, umm, I don't know what happened, but they just said, 'oh, it's because she, umm, she doesn't have, umm, she doesn't have a mom' like that, and then 'they're separated,' it's like they implied that, umm, I didn't have proper guidance because my mom wasn't there, my dad wasn't

there, and then I'm also a child from outside, so that's how they, it's like they looked at us children differently, even though we didn't do anything wrong, we're just products of it, that's all.)

The judgment against the participants' moral character, particularly their tendency to commit mistakes, is linked by society to their identity and family background, emphasizing to them that they lack parents who can guide and teach children the right behaviors and develop a moral character. However, these judgments don't hold absolute truths. In most cases, for the participants, their extended family members, such as aunts, uncles, and grandparents, assumed the role of their absent biological parents, who supported and guided them to develop a moral character. Lee's (2016) findings support this argument, as children raised by their grandparents, as in the participants' case, have grown to be insightful, mature, and able to articulate their thoughts and feelings beyond their years.

Furthermore, the judgment that the participants receive goes beyond forecasting their future. A participant has mentioned:

P7: "...they view children like me in a negative way *jud ang kuan gani kay ana sila na wala kuno mi kaugmaon kay kanang kuan lagi separate pa jud tapos naay uban na kanang mo ingon na kanang ma pariwala mi tapos or mo end up mi as our parents gani*" (...they view children like me in a negative way, umm, because they say we have no future, because, umm, we are a separated family, and then some say we'll go astray or end up like our parents.)

The participants' futures are predicted by society with negative outcomes, specifically with the idea that they will go astray from their path or become like their parents, committing the same mistakes as their parents. Even though studies like Zara et al. (2023), illegitimate children as associated with a higher likelihood of adult psychopathy due to the likelihood of experiencing neglect, unstable caregiving, and emotional abandonment, might support these possible outcomes, the presence of supporting figures of the participants nullifies these claims, as they can grow well with the guidance of their extended family members (Lee, 2016). In line with these results, it is important to note that it is not illegitimate children who are flawed, but the environment that continues to foster a system that excludes them (Gagnon, 2018).

Theme 2. Emotional Distress: The theme of emotional distress plays a significant and emotionally challenging situation for the participants, revealing their deep inner struggles. The distress felt by them is not merely simple sadness; however, it's a mixture of rejection, confusion and a lasting feeling of worthlessness grounded in the circumstances surrounding their birth. As Soyobi et al. (2024) found in their study, stigmatization significantly lowers self-esteem, and Filipino studies have described "feelings of inferiority and abandonment" as common among children born outside of marriage (Engo et al., 2022). The participant's narratives clearly showed internal struggles, which are expressed through shame, loneliness, jealousy, and fear of what lies ahead. The subthemes found under this are (1) shame, confusion, and low self-worth, (2) loneliness and abandonment, (3) jealousy and envy, and (4) resentment and anger.

Subtheme 1. Shame, Confusion, and Low Self-Worth: The core emotion identified was deep shame, lowered sense of self-worth, and confusion, reflecting what previous studies described as children being "stigmatized as marks of disgrace" (Engo et al., 2022). This confusion crystallized into a feeling of being flawed. In the end, this results in a strong feeling of alienation, as one participant shared. The participants mentioned that:

P6: "...I feel ashamed *gyud ato pag una gyud...*" (I really felt ashamed at first.)

P7: "*Umm, umm katong una gyud nakong nahibal-an siya kaymura kog nalibog 'unsa diay na siya' nya tapos kanang 'so dili diay ko mura'g original?'*" (Umm, when I first learned about it, I was confused, like "what is that?" and then "so I'm not a legitimate child?")

P7: "...*feel nako kulang or kanang gi kaulaw ko or maybe anak ko sa mistake gani*" (I feel like I'm lacking, or I feel ashamed, or maybe I'm a child of a mistake.)

P7: "...*feel nako na outcast ko...*" (I feel like an outcast.)

It is evident in the participants' responses that many of them went through a deep struggle with their sense of self after learning the truth about their birth circumstance. As the participant questioned whether she was an "original", it showed that she is unsure of her own worth and place in the world. One participant's explicit expression of feeling "ashamed," and another's belief that she was a "mistake" or an "outcast," demonstrate how strongly they internalized the stigma attached to their circumstances. The participants' pain and internal struggle go beyond their parents' choices and have become part of how they view themselves, as if they were born carrying a sense of wrongness that they cannot easily shrug off. This mirrors what the previous studies describe as internalized shame, which often develops when individuals are stigmatized from an early age (Soyobi et al., 2024).

These experiences truly reveal how deeply the participants' sense of self was affected by the truth of their identity. The feelings of shame and confusion they expressed reveal the lasting impact of stigma and rejection. Needless to say, their ability to recognize and reflect on these emotions presents an emerging strength and a desire to understand themselves better than their peers.

Subtheme 2. Loneliness and Abandonment: This distress was intensified by feelings of being abandoned by their own parents, which previous studies describe as "early-life adversities" such as neglect, unstable caregiving, and emotional abandonment. These factors increase psychological risks (Zara et al., 2023). With that, participants mentioned:

P1: "...*gibiyaan man gud ko sa akong mama.*" (...my mom abandoned me.)

P1: "...*deprived ka sa love sa imo papa, sa imo mama, deprived ka tanan.*" (...you're deprived of your father's love, your mother's love, you're deprived of everything.)

P1: "*Feeling nimo walay mo laban.*" (You feel like no one will defend you.)

P1: "...*naa kay problem na di nimo kaya unya wala kay kaduolan kay wala kay papa ug mama unya kinahanglan nimo siya e face alone.*" (...you have a problem you can't handle and you have no one to run to because you don't have a father and mother, and you have to face it alone.)

The participant's words also show a deep sense of abandonment that affected how he views the world. Participants used words like "*gibiyaan*" (abandoned) and "deprived" to describe his childhood. This shows how the absence of parental love became the foundation of his emotional struggles. This was not just a temporary absence for them but a lifelong reality that forced them to face problems on their own. When one participant said, "*walay mo laban*" (no one to defend you), it showed how lonely and vulnerable he/she felt, resulting from growing up without consistent love and protection. According to a recent study, this is referred to as "early-life adversity," which can have lasting effects on a person's emotional well-being (Zara et al., 2023).

Subtheme 3. Jealousy and Envy: The direct result of this sense of abandonment was jealousy towards peers who grew up in a "complete family," a pattern also observed in studies of broken family relationships (Castro-Bofill et al., 2016). Participants expressed that:

P1: "*Hangtod karon, naa gihapon, magselos [ko].*" (Until now, there's still jealousy.)

P1: "...*sakit pa gyud kaayo sa buot kay pag-uli niya naa na siya'y bana then naa na siya'y duha ka anak gani, which is mas sakit siya kay gipakita pa gyud niya sa akoo nga gi-unsa niya pag-care ang akoang mga manghod. Na wala gyud nako na experience - never.*" (...it was so painful because when she returned, she already had a husband and two kids, which was more painful because she showed me how she cared for my younger siblings. Something I never experienced.)

P2: "...*murag masuya pud ko, sa atoa pang pinulongan karon na 'sanaol.'*" (I feel envious, or in today's slang, "sana all" [I wish everyone had that].)

P4: "*Aw kana tingali'ng kuan, Family Day.*" (Oh, perhaps during Family Days.)

P7: "...*permi gani siya'ng [auntie] motawag sa akong mga ig-agaw and then during those moments kay kanang murag masuya ko sa ilaha feel nako lahi, lahi mi ni [siblingbrother]*" (She [auntie] would always call my cousins, you know, and then during those moments, I would feel kind of jealous of them. I felt that it was different, that [brotherbrother] and I were different.)

Their experiences also show how painful it was for them to witness what a "normal" family looks like, especially when it was something they could not have. One participant stated that seeing his mother care for his half-siblings was "*mas sakit*" (more painful) because it reminded him of the affection he missed. Another one said she felt "*lahi*" (different) from her cousins, while the other participants mentioned moments like Family Day in school that made them wish for a complete family. One put it best with the simple word "*sanaol*" wishing he had that too, which carries a quiet longing for something that seems out of reach. This jealousy did not come just from anguish but from a deep yearning to experience the same love and security that other people often take for granted.

Subtheme 4. Resentment and Anger: The participants felt a lot of sadness and unhappiness because of their bad situations. This often showed up as resentment. This anger was always aimed at their parents. They felt their parents were to blame for the choices that led to their current problems. The parents' choices, whether they were mistakes, bad decisions, or just bad luck, were seen as the main reason for the children's difficulties. This created a cycle of anger and emotional problems in the family. This specific anger was a clear and strong sign of their pain, and it was a strong cry for control when they felt they had none.

P1: "...*Kay naglagot man gud ko kay ana si mama 'ay na pa eskwelaha ha kay magdako ra na nga way ayo' Sa kalagot niya. Naglagot man gud ko, 'awa lang mo,' 'bantay lang gyud mo'.*" (Because I got so angry when my mother said, 'Don't let him go to school because he'll just grow up to be useless.' Because of her anger. I got so mad, I thought to myself, 'You all just watch,' 'You all better watch out or just you wait.)

P6: "...*naa gihapo'y pagdumot pero dili na gyud pareha sauna nga ah lagot kayko sa akong papa gyud*" (...there is still resentment, but it's not like before when I was really angry at my father.)

P7: "...*nalain gyud ko atong nahimo ba, katong nahimo gani'ng nila although ako moy dapat na magpasalamat ko kay ila kong gi himo*" (I really felt bad about what they did, what they did, although I should be the no one who's thankful because they made me.)

Resentment was also a common emotional response that appeared in the participants' narratives. One participant showed "*kalagot*" (anger) not just towards his situation but also because of the hurtful words his mother said to him. Over time, he turned that anger into motivation, using it as a fuel to prove her wrong. Another shared that although her anger towards her father has softened with time, the "*pagdumot*" (resentment) lingers. The other participant also shared how she felt "*nalain*" (wronged) by her parents' decisions, yet conflicted because she believed she should still be grateful for her life. Their anger was not simple or one-dimensional; it was tied to pain, love, and the complicated effort to understand the people who brought them into the world. The participants' experiences reflect to what previous studies have found, where children who experience parental infidelity often feel retrospective resentment towards their parent's wrong doings.

Theme 3. Facing Legal and Inheritance Limitations: This theme captures the participants' challenges, not just limited to social but also structural. They also faced challenges that went beyond feelings and into legal realities. Their status as "illegitimate" did not only affect how others saw them but also shaped what they were legally allowed to claim, especially in relation to their fathers. Many of them grew up unable to use their father's surname and aware that they had limited access to inheritance, reminders that the stigma they felt emotionally was reinforced by actual laws. In the Philippines, these distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate children remain part of the legal system, reflecting Bronfenbrenner's exosystem, in which policies beyond their control influence their sense of identity, security, and future opportunities. As Tomar (2022) notes, while some countries have moved toward equal rights, several Asian nations still maintain legal barriers that continue to disadvantage illegitimate children, shaping the participants' lived realities. The subthemes identified under this theme are: (1) unable to carry the biological father's surname and (2) limited access to inheritance.

Subtheme 1. Unable to Carry the Biological Father's Surname: This subtheme highlights the identity struggles tied to legal recognition. Under Republic Act No. 9255, illegitimate children are only permitted to use their father's surname if they are expressly acknowledged by him. Without this acknowledgment, they are legally bound to carry their mother's surname, which often serves as a public marker of their status. This legal restriction reinforces the "social exclusion" discussed by Roslan & Zul-kifli (2022), making their difference visible in official documents and daily life.

P2: "*Kung unsay gida na apilyedo sa mama maoy apilyedo sa bata. Unya ang giistorya pud ana pagpanganak daw si mama cesarean man, paglusot daw nako kay, si mama nang wala sa buot pa gani. Ang galakad sa akong pangalan daw kay akong iyaan, igsuon ra ni mama. Lahi pud nga igsuon [dili ang nagpadako nako]. Ang ilang pagkabalo, ako daw anak ko sa iyang bana. Wala sila kabalo nga anak ko sa laing kuan. Mao to akong birth certificate, akong apilyedo sa iyang bana. Hasta pud sa father, iyang bana. Sa akong legal documents ako papa didto kay [redacted].*" (What was the carried surname of the mother will be the surname of the child. And there was even a story that when my mom gave birth it was cesarean, when I was pulled my mother lost consciousness. The one who processed the papers was my aunt, the sibling of my mother. Another sibling [not the ones that raised me]. They believed I was the child of my mother's husband. They did not know I was the son of another man. This is the reason on my birth certificate, my surname is like that of her husband. Even the one recorded as the father the one recorded as the father, is her husband. All my legal documents my father is [redacted].)

P3: "*Mao tung ni ingon man to ang principal sa [A] nga kuan kuno ang ipasunod kuno kay ang apilyedo kuno sa mama kuno. Kay naa man sa... kinsa tung naga, kinsa toy naga kuan ana oi, si Gloria man guro, basta naa toy naka kuan anang batasa nga kuan if dili married dili maka sunod sa kuan, sa apilyedo sa ginikanan. Lahi na karon kay pwede naman karon mo bayad rakag kuan, pwede na permahan lang sa.*" (There was a time that the principal of [A] mentioned that the surname I should follow is the surname of my mother. Because there was... who was that, who signed a law enforcing that, it was probably Gloria, someone enforced a law that if the parents are not married the surname cannot be followed by the child. Unlike today where you just have to pay, a signature will do.)

P7: "*...kasagaran sa akong mga classmates gani kay anak gyud sila within the marriage pero ako kay murag dili gani like kanang nidako baya ko na akong apilido gani gidala kay kang mama gyud and then ang naa sa balay, akong mga cousins kay ang ilang gi dala kay umm kay kung dili ang apilido ni papa kay apilido sa ilang papa gani like ako ra gyuy nalahi og apilido didto gani so feel nako, nya lain kaayo siya sa feeling... (...most of my classmates were children born within a marriage, but I felt like I was not like, I grew up carrying my mother's surname, and at home, my cousins carried their fathers' surnames. I was the only one there with a different surname, and it was a very difficult feeling for me.)*

P7: "*...I always feel different gyud kay una sa tanan is kanang sa apilido gyud dili nako, wala nako nada ang apilido gani, ni papa tapos lahi gani ka, dili ka kanang murag dili gani nimo ma ingon na kani 'siya moy akong mama, siya akong papa' dili gani nako siya masulti outloud...*" (...I always feel truly different, first of all, it's about the surname. I wasn't able to carry my father's surname. And you feel so different that you can't even bring yourself to say out loud, 'This is my mother, this is my father...')

Evident from these responses is that the surname is not merely a name but a legal definition of belonging. One participant's experience demonstrates how a surname acts as a constant reminder of being "*lahi*" (different) from the rest of the family, solidifying her feeling of being an outsider within her own home. Another participant's realization that he has "no rights" highlights the powerlessness felt when paternal recognition is withheld. Ultimately, the law turns their name into a badge of their illegitimacy.

Subtheme 2. Limited Access to Inheritance: This subtheme explains how the legal system of the country formally validates and strengthens the difficulties faced by children born outside of marriage, making their inequality a more systemic problem. Participants are constantly reminded of their status in both family and society due to this legal discrimination. In the Philippines, this is mentioned in laws such as Article 895 of the Civil Code, which states that illegitimate children are entitled to only half the inheritance of legitimate children. This law demonstrates that the legal structure itself creates barriers that impact their identity, family connections, and future financial prospects. With that, participants mentioned:

P1: “*So mao to [adopted children] ang nakakuha sa tanan na properties sa akoang papa, sila. So wala ko. So, rejected talaga—kanang wala.*” (So, they [adopted children] were the ones who got all of my father's properties. So I didn't get any (or 'I was left with nothing'). So it was truly rejected—like, none at all.)

P2: “*...not knowing illegitimate ra man ko, anak ra man ko sa gawas kung buot mahimo wala gyud koy katungod man*” (... not knowing I'm illegitimate, a child from outside, so if you think about it, I really have no rights.)

P3: “*...dili ma sunod gyud nako, bisag ako iyang anak kaysa legal gyud ... mas maayo na mag... himo kuno og adoption paper para ako kunoy mo sunod*” (...I can't inherit, even if I'm his child, because legally... it's better to process an adoption paper so I can inherit his assets.)

The participants' status as "illegitimate" affects them legally, not just emotionally and in terms of identity. For instance, one participant implied that he/she was excluded from their father's inheritance, which directly went to the legally adopted children. The others also explained that they have no inheritance rights unless they are formally adopted, since their current names are from their mothers. One participant also highlighted that his/her surname consistently reminds them that they are "*lahi*" (different). Their sense of exclusion is not limited to the emotional aspect but also extends to the legal and social systems they live in. Despite these hardships, the participants showed remarkable strength and resilience. Studies have indicated that children born outside of marriage often display "remarkable resilience and agency" (Engo et al., 2022), which was evident in the participants' life stories.

Theme 4. Seeking Social Support: This theme appeared as the most important coping mechanism for the participants. Since many of them did not have the usual support of a complete family, they turned to others and communities for help and comfort. Some actively sought guidance and emotional support, while others were fortunate to find it naturally from relatives, friends, or mentors who deeply cared for them. These individuals and groups became their sources of strength, helping them face their struggles and easing the pain of feeling alone. This kind of support acted as a shield, providing them with stability and a sense of belonging that their family situation could not. The subthemes found under this are (1) reliance on grandparents and (2) confiding in friends and partners.

Subtheme 1. Reliance on Grandparents: Grandparents were evidently identified as the primary caregivers and the most dependable source of stability for the participants. They took on the emotional and practical responsibilities that absent parents could not, offering love, protection, and guidance during challenging times. For many, the presence of their grandparents formed the basis of their family identity, providing the warmth and consistency necessary for their development despite the instability of their upbringing. The participants mentioned:

P1: “*Akong lola baya ang nagpadako nako. [Sa akong] Mother's side. Kay didto jud baya ko gibilin ni mama pag-6 months old pa ko. Unya grabe kaayo ang story kay grabe pud ang struggles sa ako lola kay ako lola gulang na baya...*” (You know, it was my grandmother who raised me. [From my] Mother's side. Because my mother really left me there when I was only 6 months old. And the story is quite intense because my grandmother's struggles were also intense, considering my grandmother is quite old.)

P2: “*[Before] si lola.*” ([Before] it was grandma.)

P7: “*Sila lola man gud to gud nag guide sa amoa pag bata pami*” (It was grandma who guided us when we were young.)

The participants' stories clearly show that grandparents became the most important people in their lives for care and stability. When parents were not around, grandparents stepped in to offer the emotional and physical support children needed to grow. For example, Participant 1's story highlights the great sacrifice his grandmother made, raising him from just six months old despite his/her own age and difficulties. The participants also experienced similar guidance in terms of affection and protection from their grandmothers during their early years.

These accounts demonstrate how, in many Filipino families, grandparents play a vital role in filling the emotional gap left by absent parents, acting as both caregivers and emotional anchors who provide the stability that parents cannot.

Subtheme 2. Confiding in Friends and Partners: Friends and romantic partners also played a significant role in helping participants manage their emotions. Through talking, sharing experiences, and getting emotional support, these relationships offered a safe place where they could express feelings they often kept private. Having someone who listened and understood helped them manage their pain and gain confidence in building healthy emotional connections. For many, these relationships were a key part of their healing and personal development. The participants expressed:

P1: “*Karon kay sila ng [redacted]. Silang akong mga adoptive cousin ako hilakan.*” (Now, it's [redacted]. My adoptive cousins are the ones I cry to.)

P2: “*My boyfriend. Siya gyud akong kasumbongan tanan nga about anang naay problema sa pamilya.*” (My boyfriend. He's the one I tell everything to about family problems.)

P6: “*...dayun ni open up pod ko ato sa akong mga friends, nila ni [redacted] nila ni [redacted], ingon-ana.*” (...then I also opened up to my friends, to [redacted], to [redacted], things like that.

The participants stated that friendships and romantic relationships were vital to their emotional recovery. Human connection plays a vital role in making participants openly share the pain they typically keep private. The participants mentioned trusting their boyfriends to discuss family issues, and the other participant mentioned honesty with friends, demonstrating how these relationships provided the necessary understanding and acceptance often missing at home. Another participant's adoptive cousins also expressed genuine care and empathy, which helped the participant alleviate the feelings of loneliness. To help participants regain confidence in forming meaningful emotional connections, they must be in a supportive relationship that makes them feel heard, valued, and less isolated.

Theme 5. Regulating Cognition and Emotion: Despite being an illegitimate child who experienced neglect and internal struggles, they still managed to cope (Engo et al., 2022). The challenges they encountered led them to develop strategies for managing emotional pain and maintaining a sense of self-worth. Their personal narratives show how they made a conscious effort to think positively, accept their identities, and find strength within themselves. This aligns with the findings of recent studies, which describe individuals as “fostering a positive mindset” and practicing “identity acceptance” as key ways to endure and recover from ongoing experiences of exclusion (Engo et al., 2022; Almazan, 2021). The subthemes found under this are (1) acceptance and reframing, (2) developing immunity, and (3) emotional suppression.

Subtheme 1. Acceptance and Reframing: The participants gradually learned to accept their situation that helped them ease their emotional pain. This didn't mean forgetting their past but rather understanding it and finding peace with what could not be changed. They started to see their experiences not just as sources of pain but also as opportunities for personal growth and strength. They could let go of old anger and focus on a more positive outlook by choosing to accept things. The participants mentioned:

P5: “*I choose to stay optimistic na lang.*” (I will just choose to stay optimistic.)

P6: “*...ah it is what it is nalang gyud diay*” (...ah, it really is what it is.)

The participants' responses show how they gradually transitioned from feeling pain to learning to accept it as a way to cope with their circumstances. One mentioned, “it is what it is,” which reflected a practical way of accepting reality and letting go of things beyond his/her control. Another participant takes it further by choosing to “stay optimistic,” demonstrating a deliberate effort to see things from a more positive perspective. This acceptance doesn't mean they have forgotten what they went through: rather, it means they've learned to find hope through a positive mindset, as mentioned in the previous study by Engo et al. (2022). They learned to change how they perceive it instead of trying to rewrite their past.

Subtheme 2. Developing Immunity: The participants learned to protect themselves from the pain caused by stigma over time. They gradually became less affected by the negative comments and labels directed at them. They learned to step back emotionally from hurtful words and unfair judgments, rather than letting these experiences shape how they saw themselves. This kind of emotional strength helped them regain confidence and self-worth, allowing them to face criticism with courage and stability rather than sadness. The participants said that:

P3: “...pero kana mura naman kog kuan ana gud, na immune nako ba, murag e, mura nakog wala na kay ang uban baya pud ma offend baya anan na kuan...” (...but you know, I've already become kind of, you know, I've become immune to it. It's like, I don't feel it anymore, because others, you know, they would get offended by that kind of thing.)

P4: “...kadugayan... ma immune nalang ka... Bisag unsaon nimo'g kaguol, wala raman mao raman gihapon wala nama'y mausab.” (...eventually... you just become immune... No matter how much you worry, it's all the same, nothing will change.)

The participants' responses reflect a gradual strengthening of their emotional resilience over time. Becoming “immune” to hurtful remarks is the common statement of the two participants. One also realized that worrying more about his birth circumstances changes nothing. These reveal a process of emotional adaptation. Instead of internalizing society's negative views, they learned to detach and protect their sense of self from external judgment. This “emotional immunity” helped them regain a sense of control and self-respect, allowing them to face criticism with strength and resilience rather than pain.

Subtheme 3. Emotional Suppression: On one hand, illegitimate children develop positive ways to cope and handle all the discrimination around them. On the other hand, some learn to keep their feelings hidden rather than express them. They often choose to bottle up their sadness, anger, or frustration to avoid appearing weak. A recent study refers to this as a “negative coping strategy” because this prevents them from true healing and can lead to a deeper emotional exhaustion (Magpantay et al., 2024). The participant stated that:

P3: “*i-luom ang kasakit [laughs]*” (...suppress the pain [laughs].)

The response revealed that he/she managed his/her emotions by keeping his/her pain hidden rather than expressing it. The statement about suppressing pain even with a laugh, shows how he/she uses humor or silence to mask what he/she truly feels. This tendency to hold everything in may help him/her appear strong however, it also reflects the heavy burden of carrying emotions alone. Emotional suppression allows him/her to keep moving forward however, it often comes at the cost of inner peace. This causes feelings unaddressed and healing incomplete.

Theme 6. Demonstrating Behavioral and Action-Oriented Strategies: The participants' experiences showed a much deeper inner strength. They chose to take action and work toward improving their lives rather than remaining passive in the face of hardship. This determination reflects what Engo et al. (2022) describe as a strong will to succeed and a sense of personal agency among people who have faced similar challenges. This theme highlights the active and practical ways participants coped, showing that resilience often takes the form of persistence, self-motivation, and empowerment. The subthemes found under this are (1) distraction, (2) focusing on personal goals, (3) openness, and (4) religious faith.

Subtheme 1. Distraction: Distraction was one of the most common and practical ways the participants managed their negative thoughts and emotions. Many turned to hobbies, education, or spending time with others to keep their minds busy and avoid dwelling on painful memories. They were able to temporarily distance themselves from feelings of sadness or rejection by keeping themselves occupied most of the time. This strategy helped them to manage their emotions and maintain a sense of control in their everyday lives, even if it did completely take away their painful emotions. The participants said that:

P5: “...[ma]ngita ko'g butang nga maka distract sa akoang kaugalingon.” (...I intentionally look for something to distract myself.)

P6: “*Ang akoang ma kuan na coping mechanism sauna kay i-distract ra gyud nako akoang self by kanang, exploring kanang everything nga maka pa kuan gani, kanang unsa’y tawag ana uy, kanang ma divert akong attention gani ana and para dili kayko makahunahuna ato mga negative things like doing hobbies, or kanang being around with my friends and bonding with my family.*” (My former coping mechanism was really just to distract myself by, you know, exploring everything that could, you know, what do you call it, that would divert my attention, so that I wouldn't think about those negative things, like doing hobbies, or you know, being around with my friends and bonding with my family.)

P7: “*...usually I distract myself gyud sa mga dapat nakong buhaton para dili nako siya mahuna-hunaan gani og taman*” (I usually distract myself with things I need to do so I don't overthink it.)

Participants' responses indicated that distraction helped them cope with their difficult emotions. On the one hand, the participant's effort to intentionally look for something to do to keep him/her occupied, and another participant's focus on tasks that need to be done to avoid overthinking, highlight how staying active can ease emotional pain. On the other hand, other participants found comfort in hobbies and in spending time with friends and family, which indeed helped take their minds off negative thoughts. It may sound like a simple strategy to cope; however, it helped them ease their emotional pain whenever the thought arose.

Subtheme 2. Focusing on Personal Goals: It is evident to the participant that he/she used his/her hardships as his/her main source of motivation to reach that success. One study found that resilience can turn hardship into a meaningful sense of purpose (Engo et al., 2022). This has reflected in the participant's strong determination to succeed. The participant effectively used his/her difficult experiences as motivation, whether through education, career development, or personal growth. He transformed his pain into a driving force of success. The participant highlighted and mentioned that:

P1: “*...ako gud ganahan man gud ko- nagdako ko, ganahan ko ba naa koy ma prove sa akong mama.*” (I really want to—as I was growing up, I wanted to prove something to my mother.)

A participant's responses reveal that setting and pursuing personal goals provide a meaningful way to cope with their struggles. The participant's desire to prove himself to his mother shows how pain and longing were transformed into motivation for self-growth. Despite the immense challenges he/she faced, he/she decided to focus on building a better life through hard work and perseverance. This attention on achievement not only gave him/her a sense of purpose but restored his/her confidence and self-worth. Through pure grit and dedication to succeed, a way was found to turn the tides of hardship into the recipe for growth and empowerment.

Subtheme 3. Openness: Some participants practiced openness as a coping strategy, reflecting what Almazan (2021) describes as “identity acceptance” in his study. They chose to speak openly and honestly about their experiences and birth circumstances instead of staying silent. This strategy allowed them to take control of their life narrative, release painful emotions, reduce the power of stigma, and find confidence in who they are. The participants were able to convert their feelings of shame into strength by accepting and voicing their truth. They mentioned that:

P2: “*...ako na lang i-share- i-share na lang nako kay the moment nga i-share kay dawaton nako nila kay kabalo naman sila.*” (...I'll just share it—I'll just share it because the moment I share, they will accept me because they already know.)

P3: “*Ana man gyud ko niya [mama] mo open mo istorya ni mama kayni papa di man kaayo ko mo kuan og istorya, dili kaayo showy ba.*” (That's how I am to her [mother]—I open up and talk to my mother, but to my father, I don't really, you know, talk much, I'm not very open 'showy' with my feelings.)

P6: “*Dayon, how did I cope with the situation? Kay, kanang, sige ra gyud ko'g open sa akong mga close gani nga mga tawo sa akong kinabuhi and kuan kanang, especially sa akong lola kay siya man gyu'i kanang nakasabot gyud ba sa situation og mao sa'y nagpa tubo pod namo.*” (Then, how did I cope? I just kept opening up to the people who are close to me, especially my grandmother. She was the one who truly understood the situation, and she also helped raise us.)

It is evident in the participants' responses that openness became a meaningful way for them to cope and accept who they really are. The participant's decision to share his story with others reflects a growing comfort in his identity and a belief that honesty can also lead to understanding and acceptance. Another participant's mention of opening up and talking with his mother reveals how he trusted his mother with this matter. Also, their willingness to talk with trusted people like her grandmother shows how expressing her feelings helped her feel lighter and more supported. This act of sharing is also a form of "identity acceptance" (Almazan, 2021), in which participants choose to own their stories rather than hide them from society. This note that it gives relief to the participants and a connection when doing it. Vulnerability is not seen as a weakness for them but a pathway to acceptance.

Subtheme 4. Religious Faith: To some participants, faith served as their main source of comfort and strength. They choose to turn to prayer as it helped them find meaning in their struggles. Prayer gives them reassurance during moments of loneliness and doubt. Their faith provided a sense of hope and guidance, which allowed them to believe that their circumstances had a purpose. For some, their relationship with God became a constant source of emotional support, helping them endure pain and develop a stronger sense of inner peace and resilience. The participants mentioned that:

P1: "*Religious ko kay tanan... nako nga kuan gina-pray man gud na nako. Mao siguro ni survive.*" (I'm religious because I pray for everything... That's probably why I survived.)

P7: "*...nagsalig ra gyud ko sa Ginoo kay since wala man sila mama ug si papa...*" (I just truly relied on God, since my mother and father were not there/present.)

The participants' responses clearly show that religious faith became a foundation of their strength and resilience. One highlighted that "*Mao siguro ni survive,*" believing that his faith brought him to where he is now, because he deeply believed that God guided him throughout his life. It is what kept him going. In the other participant's situation, she leaned on God since her parents are not around, believing that faith filled the emotional void left by her parents' absence. For these participants, faith did not merely stand as a belief but also as an active way to find comfort, hope, guidance, and strength in difficult times. They found refuge in their faith in God.

Implications of the Study

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the personal lives of illegitimate children born from extramarital affairs. The participants' narratives of pain, resilience, and acceptance reveal how social stigma and family circumstances mold one's sense of identity and belonging. This study reveals these experiences, encouraging a more empathetic and inclusive understanding of growing up in a non-traditional family structure.

In a psychological and well-being context, this study emphasizes the importance of self-acceptance and emotional validation for people who are often labeled as "illegitimate". Many participants had the courage to openly share how the distress of rejection and stigma negatively affected their sense of self, which resulted in intense internal battles with shame, guilt, and the pervasive fear of judgment. However, the participants' life narratives also present remarkable strategies to cope, such as relying on religion and faith, tapping into inner strength, and committing to self, all of which are employed to address their emotional suffering. These findings suggest that mental health professionals, social workers, and counselors must formulate tailored interventions that target identity formation, trauma of rejection, and the essential improvement of self-worth. Children from an unstable family background often have emotional wounds that are difficult to express, but raising an awareness of mental health issues in society and especially within families, can greatly aid in their journey of healing.

For families and communities, this study carries significant implications for how families approach highly sensitive topics such as infidelity and illegitimacy. It provides an important point that the children should never be the ones to carry the burden of their parents' choices. Every child deserves all the unconditional love, unshakable protection, and constant emotional support regardless of what their birth circumstances are. Parents and guardians can learn that open communication, consistent affection, and a conscious effort to avoid every

negative labeling can dramatically enhance a child's emotional resilience. The study advocates for families to eliminate patterns of silence and shame, replacing them with understanding, forgiveness, and unconditional love.

The educational and institutional systems are crucial in this study, as schools significantly influence individuals' self-perception and interpersonal interactions. This emphasizes the significance of the school system in promoting inclusion and emotional security. Professionals such as teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators must be trained to recognize signs of emotional distress that may be caused by family-related stigma. Integrating principles of family diversity and emotional intelligence into the school curriculum can help mitigate bullying and criticism.

Furthermore, based on the themes identified in this study, social workers and guidance counselors can develop specialized support groups tailored to children in non-traditional family structures. By utilizing these qualitative findings, practitioners can design interventions that provide practical tools for emotional regulation and identity formation. Implementing such programs would offer essential communal and peer support, addressing the specific areas where psychological resilience is most required to navigate the complexities of their birth circumstances. This could turn schools into safe spaces where students are valued for who they are rather than where they come from. Moreover, efficient counseling services and focused awareness initiatives can actively foster equality and empathy. This could turn schools into safe spaces where students are valued for who they are rather than where they come from.

On a societal level, this study argues for society to detach from outdated moral ethics that unfairly define a person's worth through their family background. It encourages a cultural shift from condemnation toward understanding. Particularly in societies where illegitimate children are still stigmatized. The media, religious groups, and community organizations play a vital role in shaping perceptions by emphasizing empathy, inclusivity, compassion, and the shared humanity of all children. The society can eliminate the harmful stereotypes that fuel emotional distress through normalizing conversations about non-traditional family structures.

Lastly, this study provides opportunities for researchers and policymakers to address this issue through conducting additional research and inclusive legislation. The influence of gender, culture, and socioeconomic issues on the experiences of illegitimate children can be explored and investigated in more detail. This study can also be used by policymakers to improve and strengthen child protection, ensuring that every child has equal access to benefits, education, and rights regardless of their legal status. These policies can lessen systemic prejudice and help foster a society in which the dignity of every individual is upheld.

In essence, the study extends its implications beyond personal narratives. It advocates for kindness and compassion in families, inclusivity within institutions, empathy within society, awareness in the mental health field, and equality in crafting legal policies. This study seeks to foster acceptance, promote healing, and reinforce the social cohesion that is uniting all individuals regardless of their origins.

Ultimately, the researchers see that there are many ways in which the lives of illegitimate children can be improved. The most important step is taking concrete action—through familial understanding, legal reform, and social awareness—to ensure that these children are no longer defined by the circumstances of their birth but by the lives they build for themselves.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Every study has its limitations. The researchers also recognize the factors that limit their work in this study. Keeping these limitations in mind helps keep the analysis grounded and opens the door for other researchers to build on what has been started.

One limitation of this study is that experiences and narratives may vary. The researchers spoke with a handful of individuals, and their stories were deep and powerful. However, their experiences varied depending on their upbringing, family dynamics, and the acceptance from both parents and society. These differences do not allow the findings to fully capture the entire range of experiences of those individuals who share the same birth

circumstances. With that said, future studies should consider more individuals from diverse backgrounds and communities to gain a more complete understanding of their lives.

Another limitation is that the study's focus was on participants who are living in Cebu. This particular setting may have shaped their experiences and narratives. The cultural norms and social views in Cebu may also have influenced their stories. This geographical limitation suggests that there is a possibility that individuals in other regions of the Philippines might face distinct forms of social pressures or find support in different ways like in Luzon or Mindanao. Therefore, the findings are influenced by the specific cultural setting of the region and may not represent the full diversity of experiences across the Philippines.

Additionally, this study focuses on a sensitive topic. Some potential participants chose not to proceed which may have also affected the findings of this study. Also, some participants might have found it hard for them to open up without hesitation because of the emotional weight they carry. Intense emotions could have influenced their openness and how much of their story are they willing to share. The study also relied solely on personal recollections which resulted to some details to be unintentionally left out or expressed differently. Furthermore, limitations in time restricted the possibility to conduct longer interviews that could have provided a much deeper insight into their coping strategies and emotional experiences.

The study remains valuable because it was able to capture the essence of what it feels like to live with the label of being "illegitimate" despite its limitations. Acknowledging these limitations reveals the path forward for future research. The stories gathered reflect real emotions and challenges that are often left unspoken in society. These limitations simply highlight the need for future researchers to continue exploring this topic, involving more participants and different perspectives to further strengthen understanding and compassion toward individuals born under similar circumstances.

To deepen the generalizability of these findings, future research should prioritize interviewing a more substantial group of individuals from varying geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Including participants from different regions, such as Luzon or Mindanao, alongside those from diverse income brackets, would help determine whether the observed challenges are universal or influenced by one's specific environment. Investigating how financial privilege might mitigate social exclusion would yield vital data on whether economic resources act as a buffer against stigma, aiding in the development of mental health interventions tailored to specific regional and economic realities. To deepen the generalizability of these findings, future research should prioritize interviewing a more substantial group of individuals from varying geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds. Including participants from different regions, such as Luzon or Mindanao, alongside those from diverse income brackets, would help determine whether the observed challenges are universal or influenced by one's specific environment. Investigating how financial privilege might mitigate social exclusion would yield vital data on whether economic resources act as a buffer against stigma, aiding in the development of mental health interventions tailored to specific regional and economic realities.

This could also be further developed by advocating for specific legislative reforms that address the legal disparities between legitimate and illegitimate children. It would be beneficial to focus on the amendment of Article 176 of the Family Code, which currently mandates that the legitime of an illegitimate child is only one-half (1/2) of that of a legitimate child. Proposing a legal framework that equalizes successional rights would help bridge the systemic gap that reinforces the "second-class" status felt by children born of affairs.

Furthermore, the legal discourse should also extend in addressing Article 992 of the Civil Code, often called the *Iron Curtain Rule*, which prohibits illegitimate children from inheriting from the legitimate relatives of their parents. Reforming this provision would help determine whether removing these "legal walls" can mitigate the social exclusion and internalized stigma observed in this study. A more comprehensive analysis of how these specific legal shifts would impact the psychological well-being of non-traditional families on a national scale would be feasible. This could also be further developed by advocating for specific legislative reforms that address the legal disparities between legitimate and illegitimate children. It would be beneficial to focus on the amendment of Article 176 of the Family Code, which currently mandates that the legitime of an illegitimate child is only one-half (1/2) of that of a legitimate child. Proposing a legal framework that equalizes successional rights would help bridge the systemic gap that reinforces the "second-class" status felt by children born of affairs.

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Another ideal approach would be to utilize a quantitative approach. Future researchers could use surveys to measure and compare levels of anxiety, depression, or various attachment styles. This type of research has the potential to yield empirical data on the psychological consequences of this birth circumstance. This would aid in identifying the crucial areas where mental health support is required.

The paper's utility could also be enhanced by adopting a comparative lens in future research. It would be beneficial to include participants from diverse family backgrounds, such as those from cohabiting couples versus those from extramarital affairs. This would help determine whether the challenges observed, such as social stigma, are influenced by the specific nature of the parents' relationship or the legal status of the child. A more nuanced understanding of how *secrecy* versus *publicity* affects the child's lived experience would be feasible through this comparison. The paper's utility could also be enhanced by adopting a comparative lens in future research. It would be beneficial to include participants from diverse family backgrounds, such as those from cohabiting couples versus those from extramarital affairs. This would help determine whether the challenges observed, such as social stigma, are influenced by the specific nature of the parents' relationship or the legal status of the child. A more nuanced understanding of how secrecy versus publicity affects the child's lived experience would be feasible through this comparison.

Additionally, a longitudinal study would provide a distinctly insightful perspective. This would include observing a group of individuals over an extended period, ideally from childhood into adulthood. A study of this nature could demonstrate how their coping strategies evolved across different life stages. It would also be beneficial to understand how they establish their own families and whether the patterns from their past influence their future.

Finally, the findings of this study show that the participants relied heavily on their "surrogate families". The experience of these caregivers themselves could also be the focus of future researchers. It would be highly beneficial to conduct a study examining the perspectives of grandparents, aunts, and uncles who took on the responsibility of raising these children. It would be beneficial to learn about what motivates them and what challenges they encounter. The systems of resilience that enabled these children to reach their potential can be further explained through recognizing their perspective on the narrative.

CONCLUSION

Filipinos deeply value marriage and condemn infidelity, which creates unique challenges for children born from extramarital affairs. This study explored perceptions of marriage and infidelity, family dynamics, and the lived experiences of individuals born from an affair. The findings revealed that despite their birth circumstances, participants uphold marriage and strongly condemn infidelity. Most grew up without one or both biological parents but received guidance and support from grandparents, other relatives, or non-kin who stepped in as parental figures, while a few had cohabiting parents fulfilling parental roles. Participants also experienced deep emotional struggles, including shame, confusion, and low self-worth, often reinforced by limited family connection, social stigma, and legal restrictions such as limited inheritance or being unable to use their father's surname. Despite these challenges, they demonstrated resilience through support from others, openness, personal goal-setting, and faith. In light of these findings, the results emphasize that children born from extramarital affairs should not be held accountable for circumstances beyond their control. As reflected in the Filipino expression "walay sala ang bata" (the child bears no sin), they should not suffer discrimination or condemnation for their parents' actions. Rather, they deserve the same love, dignity, and rights afforded to children born within marriage. In light of these findings, the results emphasize that children born from extramarital affairs should not be held accountable for circumstances beyond their control. As reflected in the Filipino expression "walay sala

ang bata” (the child bears no sin), they should not suffer discrimination or condemnation for their parents’ actions. Rather, they deserve the same love, dignity, and rights afforded to children born within marriage.

This study addresses an often-overlooked population and fills a gap in knowledge about the lived experiences of children born from extramarital affairs. Future research should explore supportive interventions and legal reforms to promote their emotional well-being. Families and society must learn to accept these children without judgment, recognizing their worth beyond the circumstances of their birth.

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