The Lived Experiences of Indigenous College Students in a State University in the Philippines

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Abstract— The study captured the lived experiences of six indigenous students from the Aeta-Magbukun tribe enrolled at the College of Nursing and Midwifery and College of Engineering and Architecture during the year 2018–2019. It explored their strategies to adapt to university life. Using the phenomenological approach, three overarching themes emerged: challenged yet motivated, offended yet inspired and rooted, and insecure yet socially adjusted. Minority students experienced discrimination but found inspiration in their families and communities to move forward amidst poverty and prejudices. Furthermore, the students survived through social adaptation and group collaboration. The emerging themes have implications for university programs and policies in providing inclusivity and sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of indigenous students. Cultural diversity awareness may be promoted within the academe. This will create an environment of ethnic inclusivity, receiving additional support from the people within the academe and most importantly, from their peers. These steps may attract more indigenous students to pursue education, achieve their aspirations, and experience the life they dream of for themselves, their families, and the community. Therefore, the minority affirms the belief that joining the majority through education is a path toward a better life.

Keywords— indigenous, discrimination, lived experiences, cultural diversity, students' self-esteem

I. INTRODUCTION

The Philippine archipelago, consisting of more than 7,000 islands, is believed to be composed of 75 different minority groups. Among them are Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilocano, Tausug, T'boli, Ifugao, Badjao, and Aeta, to name a few. Aetas are sometimes called Ayta, Agta, Atta, Ati, and Ita depending on their geographical location or their relationship with other people (Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, 1994). The Philippines contains a great diversity of peoples with over 169 living ethnolinguistic groups, about 140 of which are acknowledged as indigenous. Indigenous peoples (IPs) are present in more than 50 out of 81 provinces that make up the Philippines, and, depending on the definition of indigenous populations used, they represent 10 to 20 percent of the total Philippine population (Balilla et al. 2013).

Aetas have been believed as the first inhabitants of the Philippines and the descendants of the earliest inhabitants of the archipelago preceding the great Austronesian migrations. Archaeologists believe that Aetas crossed through the land bridges that linked the Asian continents or mainland. Aetas are now scattered within the archipelago, living in a nomadic way in isolated mountain ranges of the Philippines. They live by hunting wild animals and collecting root crops, fruits, and different wild vegetables to serve as their food. However, their way of living is now gradually changing as a result of modernization and improved civilization.

Their villages are now in low-lying parts of the mountains that have easy access to towns and cities. Aetas are rich in their indigenous knowledge and practices that had sustained their communities long before the coming of other cultures (Panes and Aguibiador 2008), but their way of living is now changing because of the high density of culture, language, and ethnicity differentiation arousing among the indigenous peoples in the Philippines as a result of geographical segregation. Many of these populations among minorities retreated into isolated regions during successive events related to immigration, displacement, discrimination, and more recently economic development (Balilla et al. 2013). But because of their eagerness to level up their way of living, Aetas are now also entering different institutions to achieve their goals of educating themselves and helping fellow Aetas overcome poverty and discrimination.

The Asian Development Bank (2002) defined indigenous peoples as those with a social or cultural identity distinct from the dominant or mainstream society, making them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development processes.

Added to this, indigenous peoples in the country face multifarious problems. They are often removed from their lands, tagged as second-class citizens, and deprived due to the spread of capitalism. These conditions continue to exist and can be attributed to the deprivation

of access to quality education for indigenous communities (Peralta N.d.). Further, according to Teves (2004), the needs of indigenous people are still not acted upon accordingly compared to the needs of people in mainstream society. To support this contention, the United Nations Inter-Agency Support Group emphasizes that the "most effective way… is to work in a community-based, bottom-up manner to ensure that infrastructure, pedagogical materials, and curricula meet the sometimes-unique needs of indigenous teachers, learners, and their communities" (UN 2008).

Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, and Uli (2009), on the other hand, elaborate in their study that 75% of the dropouts in the university reflect the effect of the difficult adaptation of students on their transition, in which many of the factors can be indirectly or directly attributed to adaptation. Farris (2010) also stated that one of the most important adaptations is through social adaptation, making friends, communicating with their new environment, and coping with being far away from home. Social adaptation to a university is a crucial need for students to cope with college life, especially if one belongs to an indigenous group.

In an interview conducted by Macatuno (2015) of Inquirer in Central Luzon with an Aeta student from Cawag resettlement in Zambales, the respondent stated that "for some Aetas, completing their education is the only way for them to achieve their goals." Aetas believe that by completing their education, they would be able to change the way people would look at them. They also believe it would help them guide fellow Aetas to reach their dreams. A fifteen-year-old Aeta holds on to her dream of becoming a teacher for Aeta's children. But going to school has never been easy, especially for children belonging to indigenous groups. She has also learned to overcome discrimination. Other students would call her names because of her dark skin and kinky hair. "They would make fun of how I look, but I've learned to ignore them. I don't take them seriously," she said.

These experiences, among others, may hold true for minority students in the university. This observation prompted the researcher to conduct the study.

The study is made to assess and understand further the lived experiences of six indigenous students (Aetas) from the Magbukun tribe. All of them are studying at the Bataan Peninsula State University (Main Campus) during the school year 2018–2019. This examined the

adaptation that they went through to cope with their life in the university, their interactions with other students, and the benefits or effects of their stay or study at the university on their self-esteem. A better understanding of the social adaptation through their lived experiences, their thoughts and feelings about these experiences, and how to give meaning to these experiences were part of the investigation.

The study also gives a better understanding of the lived experiences of the students and may serve as an eye-opener for different concerned offices of the university on what programs need to be established to help minorities meet their needs and help improve their self-esteem. These programs could serve as instruments to make a way toward their dreams, hurdling poverty, and discrimination if there is any.

The general objective of the study is to determine the lived experiences of the indigenous students, focusing on the challenges and adjustments they experienced during their stay at Bataan Peninsula State University (Main Campus) during the school year 2018–2019.

Specific Objectives:
1. To determine the profile of the students in terms of:
1.1 age,
1.2 sex,
1.3 course, and
1.4 year level;
2. To describe the lived experiences of the students.
3. To capture their thoughts and feelings about their experiences.
4. To give meaning to the student's experiences.
5. To describe the implications of this study to the programs and activities of the university for the minority.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studies about the Aeta population revealed that Aetas were the first inhabitants of the Philippines. They arrived through land bridges connecting the mainland of Asia. They are now scattered in Luzon, Philippines specifically in Zambales, Pampanga, Tarlac, and Bataan. Ocampo and Ocampo (2014) also described the Aetas as the smallest people on earth. They were rich in their indigenous knowledge and practices that sustained their communities long before the coming of other cultures. The Aetas live in a close-knit community. Their way of life is characterized by their care and concern for the entire community and is reflected in their mutual support and solidarity. They help each other in

all areas of life: they build houses together, cultivate the land, learn together, and frequently they also cook together (Ličen, Lihtenvalner and Podgornik 2012). Espiritu (2017) cited the other prominent values of Aetas such as "paglingon sa pinanggalingan" (caring for one's roots), trust in God, use of herbal medicine, sharing, the pursuit of education, determination, and industriousness. These are all considered shields of survival.

Teves (2004) argues that the needs of indigenous people are still not acted on accordingly compared to others in mainstream society. A classic example of this is the educational system imposed on them by colonial and present-day educators, which the indigenous people perceive as unsuitable to their needs. The Indigenous people identify education as the crucial factor in the historical process of their marginalization. This process started at the onset of Western colonization and was carried over by states afterward. However, this mode of living gradually changed with time (Grey 2016). The system of education featured a divide-and-conquer strategy. This approach slowly destroyed and eradicated indigenous knowledge, traditions, culture, arts, and most strategically, language, while the indigenous peoples were being assimilated into the dominant culture. Nonetheless, some elements of the indigenous people's cultures, those that were deemed acceptable, were integrated into the mainstream culture. The Indigenous people had no choice but to get an education so they could be co-equals with the non-indigenous people. Yet in schools, they are taught to forget, if not condemn, cultural heritage, which is tagged as pagan or barbaric. Their histories of resistance are not highlighted, and their viable indigenous learning systems are ignored. Even the so-called alternative education programs have failed because they are not based on the concrete conditions and aspirations of indigenous peoples.

The ideologies, cultures, and priorities of the indigenous minority often contrast with that of their new world outside their community and are always in conflict with human rights and equity concerns. Their "being different" from the majority places them in vulnerable situations, hence the articulation of their identity and rights became increasingly prominent in the past decades (Tolentino 2017). The focus is directed toward equitable access to adequate provisions, education, health care, and basic infrastructure (Bodley 2008). To have these provisions, specifically equitable access to education, the minority finds it hard to adjust to their newly found environment.

Racial or ethnic discrimination from the dominant culture is real for the indigenous group. In a study conducted by Mallari (2017) about the college-educated Aetas of Pinatubo, she distinctly described such experience of psychic and social dispossession as one of the key themes that emerged during the interviews. Verbal bullying has been the usual complaint. In another study by Rogayan (2019) on the dilemmas encountered by Aeta students in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines, he stated that verbal bullying also is one of the dilemmas being confronted by the IP students. Panes and Aguibiador (2008) confirm that bullying is one of the reasons why most Aetas do not want to study in college. Accordingly, the persisting culture of discrimination against the Aetas has always been a social obstacle, and it is used to discourage them from going to school (Estacio 2007).

These and many other concerns of the indigenous group including discrimination are addressed by the Office of the Commission of Human Rights (OCHR) when it mentioned that the United Nations has highlighted the problem of discrimination against indigenous peoples since the first decade to combat racism and racial discrimination in 1973–1982. In 1982, the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations articulated the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples in a draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This led to the landmark adoption of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007 by the UN General Assembly. The declaration has rapidly become a key tool for the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.

The Philippines is one of the first countries in Asia to have approved the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act in 1997, a law recognizing the specific needs for basic health and education of its indigenous people. But much has remained wanting in its implementation even after two decades (Cornelio and Castro 2016). The Philippine Constitution mandates the recognition and protection of the rights of the indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples (ICCs/IPs) within the framework of national unity and development (Rogayan 2019).

On the other hand, people endowed with different cultures are gradually absorbed into the "mainstream" through the process of "becoming similar" (Wimmer 2009). Thus, the struggle to gain the acceptance needed in the prevailing culture involves the minority individuals' willingness to be transformed according to

the image of the majority (Mallari 2017). However, along this process, the transition from a "known" to an "unknown" culture may not be that easy. Adjustments are made while the minority students interact with the "new" group. Their prospect of survival in a mainstream academic setting would never be easy, considering their sociocultural orientation (Mallari 2017).

The research conducted by Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, and Ateeq (2015) discovered that the transition from high school to college is one of the most important milestones in one's life. However, like any changes that happen in life, it is full of stress and uncertainty. Chiriac (2014) states that group interaction is often used as a tool for learning at all levels of education. He states that there is strong scientific support for the benefits of group interaction among students especially in studying. In addition to this, Chiriac (2014) states that collaboration has a big positive effect on a student's ability to learn. He also remarks that group interaction has a huge effect on the self-esteem of students. Students themselves describe their membership in groups as an important aspect of affiliation.

The research conducted by Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) states that social interaction helps students gain more interpersonal relationships with other students and helps them to adapt to their new environment, especially for those who are new to the university. Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, and Uli (2009) also analyzed the impact of adaptation on students in the university regarding academic achievement. They discovered that students who face adjustment difficulties tend to achieve lower grades while those who have smooth adaptation have higher grades.

For instance, in a study conducted by Rogayan (2019), the Aeta students were firm in their belief that mingling with others could create collaboration and synergy. When asked about the advice that they could give to their fellow Aetas, to "mingle with different people and do not be ashamed of whom you are mingling with" ranked second on their list. However, it was cited that the students' problem, aside from bullying, was having low self-esteem.

Developing high self-esteem would have a huge effect on the perception to study and easily adapt to the university. In a study conducted by Grant-Vallone et al. (2003) on the analysis of the effects of self-esteem, social support, and participation in student support services on students' adjustment and commitment to college, the results indicated that students who reported higher levels of self-esteem and more peer support had a better academic and social adjustment. In addition, students who more frequently utilized student support services and counseling reported higher social adjustment. Finally, students who were better adjusted to campus life were more likely to be committed to the goal of a college degree and more committed to their university.

These and several pieces of literature would agree with the fact that social adaptation and having higher self-esteem while studying at a university are crucial among students and are factors to consider in coping with their college life, most especially for indigenous students.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the qualitative research method and naturalistic paradigm method in making a phenomenological study of the students' lived experiences. According to Suter (2011), a qualitative approach allows rich possibilities of inquiry that provide a distinct and more complex comprehension of people's reported experiences and observations that can contribute to the topic of the study. Through this research design, the researcher gathered data directly from the indigenous students at the university. Specifically, the study sought to understand the thoughts and feelings of the individuals during their stay at the university. This would also reveal the different insights and coping strategies in their social, emotional, and physical adaptations.

Specifically, the study made use of the phenomenological approach. According to Larkin and Thompson (2012), phenomenology is the philosophical study of existence and experience. The research followed a "basic" interpretive design (Merriam 2009), which sought to understand the interaction of individuals with the culture of the academic learning environment and the university context in which they lived and studied. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Larkin, Flowers and Smith 2021) is an approach to qualitative analysis with a particular psychological interest in how people make sense of their experiences. It provides an established, phenomenological-focused approach to the interpretation of the detailed, reflective, first-person accounts of participants. The methods of preparation are reviewing the professional and research methods, formulating the research questions, illustrating the topic and research questions, and selecting the participants

(Moustakas 1994). In phenomenological research, the questions should have both social meaning and personal significance. Ethical principles of human science research should be taken into account, and participants should be fully informed and be fully respected in their privacy. The data can also be validated by the participants.

Furthermore, in terms of sampling, Creswell (2008) suggests five to ten participants for a phenomenological study. The population of the study included six indigenous students from the Aeta-Magbukun tribe (studying at the College of Nursing and Midwifery and College of Engineering and Architecture).

Minority students are those who do not belong to a region's or nation's majority racial or ethnic group—and may be subject to discrimination, whether sanctioned or passive, that can affect their educational achievement. All six participants, who were selected purposively, came from Bataan Peninsula State University (Main Campus). Due to the confidentiality agreements with research participants, they are addressed as "Participant 1" to "Participant 6." Table 1 shows the demographic summary of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of Study Participants

Participant	Age	Ethnicity	Gender	Program	Year Level
P1	22	Aeta-Magbukun	Female	Bachelor of Science in Midwifery	Second
P2	18	Aeta-Magbukun	Male	Bachelor of Science in Civil Engineering	Fourth
P3	20	Aeta-Magbukun	Female	Bachelor of Science in Midwifery	Second
P4	20	Aeta-Magbukun	Female	Bachelor of Science in Midwifery	Second
P5	20	Aeta-Magbukun	Female	Bachelor of Science in Midwifery	Second
P6	18	Aeta-Magbukun	Female	Bachelor of Science in Midwifery	First

Before the collection of the data, an online letter of request was sent to the office of the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) in region 3, San Fernando Pampanga, Philippines asking permission the conduct the study involving indigenous students from the Magbukun community. Permission was granted with the agreement that the said office would be furnished with the findings of the study.

Initial contact with the participants was made through an invitation, and after several conversations with the students, which made them comfortable, the purpose and nature of the study were explained. During the pre-interview, it was discovered that everybody had experienced some sort of discrimination at the university. Orientation about the study was further conducted wherein the students were informed that they were not obligated to participate in the study and that they could withdraw their participation from the study anytime they felt uncomfortable with the process. All seven participants agreed to participate in the study, and they signed the consent form with the agreement that their participation would be private and confidential and that their identity would remain anonymous.

To ensure the credibility of the study, the interview questions were pre-evaluated with the help of registered psychometricians of the university. Demographic information was pre-gathered before the interview utilizing a questionnaire. Data were collected by conducting a face-to-face, semi-structured interview with each participant (Creswell 2008). Permission was elicited to use an audio recorder to document the interview. After signing the consent form, the participants were interviewed privately and individually during their free time in school. Sample key questions asked were the following: What motivated you to pursue your studies in college? What adjustments did you make to cope with your life at the university? Follow-up questions were asked based on the participant's answers to the key questions. Each interview session with the participants lasted for less than an hour. Later, a transcript validation was signed by the participants, ensuring that they reviewed how their responses had been transcribed and that they agreed on the content of the said transcriptions.

The data were transcribed verbatim in Filipino. They were also analyzed in a verbatim form in Filipino to ensure that the analysis would capture the voices of the indigenous peoples. The identifiers in the transcript were removed to ensure the anonymity of the participants. They were coded "Participants 1" to "Participant 6" from transcript to analysis. The analysis

used QDA Miner Lite to organize the bulk of data, but the coding was done manually to capture the context within the data. The transcripts were then scanned to generate an initial list of codes for research questions (RQ) 2-3. These codes were defined in the codebook for consistency in the coding process. Significant statements were identified for the first cycle coding, which yielded 18 codes for "Experiences" (RQ2) and 12 codes for "Thoughts and Feelings" (RQ3). Hence, an open coding cycle yielded 30 open descriptive codes. Analysis was made to identify important statements for further coding that may include phrases, words, or longer statements (Factor et al. 2017). Second cycle coding was done by looking for similarities among the codes, which yielded three themes. A member checking was also done to make sure that the codes were reflections of the participants' experiences. As trustworthiness is one of the qualities of good qualitative research, the initial codes, together with the translated significant statements, were sent back to the participants for member checking (Bongco and David 2020). Data storage included audio recordings and filing of hard copy documentation. These, together with the interview transcriptions, were stored electronically on multiple hard drives.

The discussions made in the analyses of data provided by the participants were given extra precautionary measures, bearing in mind that the "basic datum of phenomenology is the conscious human being," or in other words, the lived experiences of the participants in the research (Bentz and Shapiro 1998). To a great extent, the researcher prevents the data from being prematurely branded into the researcher's bias.

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The findings are presented in three overarching themes that emerged from the participant's responses. The themes are the following: (1) challenged yet motivated, (2) offended yet inspired and rooted, and (3) insecure yet socially adjusted. The emerging themes capture the essence of the student's experiences and provide implications for the programs and policies of the university for minority students.

Challenged yet motivated

Most participants spoke about the challenges brought about by poverty and discrimination while pursuing a college education. Extreme poverty as a factor is three times more likely to be experienced by indigenous and tribal communities than others with women "consistently at the bottom of all social and economic

indicators" (United Nations 2020). On the other hand, the endless cycle of discrimination mirrored the statement of Teves (2004) that the indigenous people had no choice but to get an education so they could be co-equals with the non-indigenous people. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (N.d.) revealed the fact that minorities and indigenous peoples are among the most marginalized communities in many societies that are often excluded from participation in socio-economic life, rarely given access to political power, and frequently encounter obstacles to manifesting their identity.

Ideally, minorities believe that education is the only way to overcome poverty. When asked what motivated them to pursue their studies:

"Of course, to fulfill my dreams so I can help my parents. It is because of poverty that I need to finish my studies. My mother keeps on saying this. My father experienced harvesting bamboo at an early age. He told us to study well because life is difficult. That became my foundation to continue my studies." (P2)

As attested by Balilla et al. (2013), the reasons behind the eagerness of the indigenous peoples to level up their way of living are to achieve their goals and help fellow Aetas overcome poverty and discrimination. These are the major challenges experienced mostly by the participants, but at the same time, these are also the factors that keep them going. The participants take pride in their education; it is an instrument to empower themselves and a key to their acceptance of the lowlanders' world (Mallari 2017). For them, it is the only escape from poverty and discrimination:

"Only if we can finish our studies, we will no longer be discriminated by those people in the city. This is very important for me; this is where my dreams are anchored on. It is my goal to graduate this semester and to take and pass the board examination. When that happens, I can find a job to help my family and my fellow Aetas, and it will also serve as an inspiration for them to pursue their education." (P4)

It is indeed part of the participants' dream to improve their way of living through education. The ultimate goal is to finish their studies and to help alleviate the family's poor living conditions. In the same manner, with the motivation coming from within, most of the participants want to prove that even though they are minorities, they can hurdle life's challenges and be able to achieve something:

"To be able to realize my dream, I consider what other people say as a motivation: 'You are just an Aeta. You do not have the capability. You will not accomplish anything." (P3)

This statement is further supported by Participant 2 by saying:

"I became more motivated. I would like to prove them wrong: that indigenous people are not ignorant and that they have the ability to study and learn."

Furthermore, being discriminated against is also a common experience shared by the participants. These experiences appear to have derived from an inferior image inscribed in their ethnic identity:

"Then, when they see our appearance, they make fun of us because of our dark skin." (P2)

"They will stare at us, then they will laugh at us. We just ignore them." (P5)

Presumably, all these remarks are expected by minority students when they enter the mainstream of formal education, raising hopes that they can have better economic opportunities once they graduate from college. Although they develop some sort of coping mechanism by simply ignoring the experience, the disparaging remarks have produced psychological effects and shaped their consciousness and unconsciousness (Mallari 2017). Striving to move forward, still, the experience of being bullied is real:

"People are not calling you by your real name; they call you "negro" instead. This aspect of being different becomes my concern. There are people who cannot accept those who are different from them." (P6)

The indigenous minority ideologies, cultures, and priorities often contrast with that of their new world outside their community and are always in conflict with human rights and equity concerns. Their "being different" from the majority places them in a vulnerable situation; hence, the articulation of their identity and rights has become increasingly prominent in the past decades (Tolentino 2017). The focus is directed toward equitable access to adequate provisions, education, health care, and basic infrastructure (Bodley 2008). To have these provisions, specifically equitable access to education, the minority find it hard to adjust to their newly found environment, but taking the risk is all worth it in exchange for a better and brighter future.

Racial or ethnic discrimination from the dominant culture is real for minority students. Bullying is one of the factors cited as the reason why most Aetas do not want to study in college (Panes and Aguibiador, 2008). Accordingly, the persisting culture of discrimination against the Aetas has always been a social obstacle, and it is used to discourage them from going to school (Estacio 2007). In a study conducted by Mallari (2017) about the college-educated Aetas of Pinatubo, she distinctly described such experience of psychic and social dispossession as one of the key themes that emerged during the interviews. Verbal bullying has been the usual complaint. Further, Mallari added that the derogatory term "baluga" is used to describe the Aetas as rubbed in by the lowlanders, and it was less a matter of name-calling than an insult to their ethnic identity. This bullying had debilitating effects that constantly played in their consciousness. It has been noted in the study that if the minority students did not have strong coping mechanisms and were not able to overcome them, the desire to rise above the poverty level would even more be blocked. Fortunately, the Aetas got used to being subjected to such discrimination and learned to ignore what they heard because the aim was to finish their studies. Mallari further stated that "the potentially intolerable misery and indignity that they would suffer could not match their longing for deliverance from their impoverished condition." This statement can be equally applied to the experiences of the minority students in the current study.

In another study by Rogayan (2019) on the dilemmas encountered by Aeta students in a state university in Central Luzon, Philippines, he also cited verbal bullying as one of the dilemmas being confronted by the IP students. The experience was the same, which included staring and laughing gestures by the non-indigenous group, and the same reaction was elicited from the minority students—trying to ignore the situation and focus on the goal of finishing their studies.

The concern of the indigenous groups on discrimination has been addressed by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) when it mentioned that the United Nations has highlighted the problem of discrimination against indigenous peoples since the first Decade to Combat Racism and Racial Discrimination in 1973–1982. In 1982, the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations articulated the needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples in a draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. This led to the landmark adoption of the Declaration on the

Rights of Indigenous Peoples in September 2007 by the UN General Assembly. The declaration has rapidly become a key tool for the promotion and protection of the rights of indigenous peoples.

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The minority students who promised to be protected by these laws are on the road to embracing mainstream society, even after they graduate from their respective courses. In this regard, higher education is linked to building and professionalizing indigenous human capital to help them achieve their material and non-material aspirations (Anderson 2015; Lahn 2012). However, they must go through a transition stage that opens up a series of unpredictable progression and problems (Mallari 2017). Notwithstanding the reality of discrimination and with high hopes of socioeconomic mobility and acceptance of the majority (lowlanders), they firmly believe that education still promises a better future.

Offended yet inspired and rooted

Family is the basic unit of society, and it plays an important role in Filipino culture. Familism is rooted in its social sphere, translating its relational quality outside the family (Morillo et.al 2013). Filipino families are characterized by being family-centered, having close family ties, and usually a large family size. Even among the indigenous group, these traits have been observed. The social organization of the Aeta Magbukun revolves around the nuclear family as the basic unit of the community (Balilla et al. 2013). However, this nuclear family is interdependent on other nuclear families bound together by kinship. In the Philippines, kinship is bilateral, which means that children have social responsibilities and obligations to their parents' relations and is structured by siblings' age and order of descent. Further, kinship can define, order, and express relationships, rights, and obligations within a community (Jocano 1989).

This idea of a close-knit family in the Aeta community transcends from generation to generation. Modern breeds of minority students still uphold the same values they place on the family. For most of the participants, the social responsibility and obligation to the family are still the source of strength and inspiration:

"Because of poverty, I need to finish my studies so that I can help my parents." (P2)

Further, Participant 5 has this to say:

"I want to graduate and fulfill my dreams and land a job so I can help my parents."

Some of the participants emphasized that graduating would mean fulfillment of one's dream and being able not only to help the family but also to extend help to others who believe in them.

"There is a greater chance that I can help my family and those people who believe in me." (P6)

With all the uncertainties that minority students are facing, they still hold on to the tradition of putting family first in all their aspirations. Surely, the family serves as the focus to continue the quest for a better future, but there were times when the students were pushed to their limits. Sometimes, they felt offended and sad when people treated them differently:

"Sometimes I felt so sad and offended, but I would try not to show it." (P2)

Sometimes they could no longer hold on to their emotions and show the resentment and anger they feel inside because of being treated unfairly, as the participants said:

"We feel hurt and sad when we are being treated differently. We feel that we are alone and that nobody could defend us." (P5)

As Participant 2 continues:

"Sometimes you cannot avoid feeling angry and displeased because of the discrimination. They think that if you are curly-haired, you are different. But that should not be the mindset; we are eating the same kind of food."

Despite these unpleasant experiences, another strong quality of the indigenous group is rooted in their community. Filipinos view themselves as concerning

others (Macapagal 2013). While the self is subjectively known and experienced, it is shaped by membership in the experiences and practices of a cultural community. Further, the self cannot be isolated from the cultural norms and values that determine its representation and regulation of the individual's cognitions, emotions, relationships, and behaviors (Shweder et al. 1997). A strong attachment is shown by the way the minorities considered their family as being part of their culture. Moreover, they feel proud of their achievement, and a dream come true would mean looking and serving back to the community that shaped their cultural norms and values. Espiritu (2017) cited that one of the prominent values of the Aetas is "paglingon sa pinanggalingan" (caring for one's roots), and this attribute is strongly displayed by the minority students:

"Of course, to help my fellow Aetas. That is what I really wanted to do." (P1)

Tribal ancestry also becomes the source of inspiration to prove to oneself and others that one can attain the goal of finishing one's course:

"I want to prove to myself that I can do it so that I could serve as an inspiration to others, especially to the indigenous group." (P2)

Other minority students decided to serve their community so that services may be available and more accessible:

"So that I can help my community, which is far from the city, and very few are taking up this course." (P6)

Although there is the agony of passing through the process of acculturation, there is also a strong tendency to re-plant their roots in their new abode. Amidst uncertainties in the process, a better life is promised to them, their family, and their community. Education in the university is one way of seeking opportunities to overcome their predicament and to help their fellow Aetas and the community.

Relatively, in a study conducted by Anicas (2020) on the socioeconomic status of the Aetas in the province of Zambales, it was found that mutual understanding between and among the members of the Aeta communities was dynamic. The community worked as one in the realization of their activities, projects, and programs by being active and cooperative. Further, it was mentioned that Aetas were willing to share their knowledge, skills, and talent for the betterment of their community.

Rogayan (2019) affirmed in his study that the Aeta students pursued a degree specifically in the field of education to help their fellow Aetas, to share their knowledge and skills. It was also cited that the influence of the family has been very significant, to imply that culture largely affects decision-making, like career choice (Abulon 2010).

As previously mentioned, the Aetas live in a close-knit community. Their way of life is characterized by their care and concern for the entire community and is reflected in their mutual support and solidarity. They help each other in all areas of life: they build houses together, cultivate the land, learn together, and frequently they also cook together (Ličen et.al 2012). Espiritu (2017) cited the other prominent values such as "paglingon sa pinanggalingan" (caring for one's roots), trust in God, use of herbal medicine, sharing, the pursuit of education, determination, and industriousness, are all considered shields of survival.

For the Aetas, it is embedded in one's system to look after the welfare of their fellow Aetas and to feel proud that they can serve as instruments to uplift the economic conditions of the family and the community. The students may be offended at times, but the strong determination to succeed is the compelling force that prompts them to continue. Strong attachment to the family, just like any other Filipino family, is a virtue that will constantly be manifested among the indigenous group, even during this digital age.

For most of the participants, the biggest factor in determining success is the contention made by Tinto (1987) as cited by Janes (1997) that individual commitment is central to degree completion. According to Tinto, there are two major forms of individual commitment—goal and institutional. All the participants in this study are committed to their career goals. They stay connected and involved in the university although sometimes they feel alienated—all for a "better life."

Moreover, the community is an extension of the student's aspirations. Deeply rooted in the original home they were once raised in; the students feel the urge to go back and be proud of their achievements. Any success attained would be willingly shared among their fellow Aetas to the extent of using their knowledge and skills as a way of reaching out to them. The intrinsic

motivation to succeed, proving to oneself that a career goal is possible, is a way of bringing pride to a once abandoned comfort zone.

To return to one's roots armed with the degree is a sweet revenge for a discriminated race, an inheritance that no one can take away from them.

Insecure yet socially adjusted

The minority students' quest to acquire a college education can be associated with exposure to dilemmas and pressures. While having the mainstream way of life, there are choices to make: whether to quit or to conform and submit themselves to the prevailing culture of mainstream society. As such, being alienated because of their ethnicity, at first, they cannot help but feel insecure, as shown in their shy personality and being unsure of what they can do:

"I was affected by my shyness. There are things that I would like to do, but I could not accomplish anything. I was thinking if I commit mistakes, they might ridicule me." (P4)

Insecurity is a feeling of inadequacy (not being good enough) and uncertainty. It produces anxiety about goals, relationships, and the ability to handle certain situations (Brennan 2020). For the participants, it is coming from their body image, which includes the way they look and if they measure up to a set standard. The social anxiety is rooted in the way they interact with the people around them and how these people perceive them as minorities with their indigenous background:

"It was difficult for me during my first year. I made some adjustments. I know it's different from where I came from, and I felt ashamed." (P2)

Supporting the same experience, Participant 3 has this to say:

"We are adjusting because we grew up in an entirely different culture."

Moving slowly along the road into the mainstream, the reality of having two different worlds has dawned on the students. The idea of being different in terms of identity and culture contributes to the insecurity at the start, the question of what they can and cannot do. One devastating effect of such emotion is to quit dreaming. As Participant 1 attested:

"I want to stop studying (laugh). But, of course, you need to think of your future in terms of the financial aspect."

It is not impossible to quit in a situation where acceptance and sense are absent of belonging. There is a need for the minority to struggle through the paths of being recognized and being an integral part of one's alien environment. In doing so, people endowed with different cultures are gradually absorbed into the "mainstream" through the process of "becoming similar" (Wimmer 2009). Thus, the struggle to gain the acceptance needed in the prevailing culture involves the minority individuals' willingness to be transformed according to the image of the majority (Mallari 2017). This is where the painful process of adjustment begins.

All of the participants shared the adjustments they went through to survive in their new environment. It was not easy at the start, and all of them reported facing difficulties in making the necessary transition:

"At first, you do not really know what to do when they stare at you, but I get used to it." (P4)

Participant 2 has this to say:

"It was hard for me during my first year."

As mentioned by Participant 4, they get used to college life over time. Most of the participants adopted almost the same strategies for the needed adjustment in the university. The students learned the lesson that adaptation is the key to survival—that they need to develop relationships with their peers throughout their stay at the university:

"Ah, first you need to get along well so that you may create an impression." (P2)

"In order to adjust, I tried to socialize." (P3)

"Maybe what I learned is that you should be able to know how to socialize not only with the indigenous group but with the Tagalogs as well. When you are with them (Tagalogs), do not think you are different." (P4)

Corollary to this, participation in some selective campus activities like sports and the arts could help boost the confidence of minority students and elevate their self-esteem. Participant 2 has this to say:

"My talent in dancing and sports (basketball) helped me a lot during my adjustment period. When they

discovered that I could dance and play sports (basketball), everything changed."

Chiriac (2014) affirmed that collaboration has a big positive effect on a student's ability to learn. He further stated that group interaction has a huge effect on the self-esteem of students. Farris (2010) also stated that one of the most important adaptations is a social adaptation, such as making friends, communicating with their new environment, and coping with being far away from their homes.

The previous review of related studies supports the current findings. The research conducted by Hurst, Wallace, and Nixon (2013) states that social interaction helps students gain more interpersonal relationships with other students, which also helps them to adapt to their new environment, especially for those who are new to the university. Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, and Uli (2009) elaborate that 75% percent of university dropouts are a result of the hard adaptation of students to their transition. Many of the factors can be indirectly or directly attributed to adaptation. Further, Abdullah, Elias, Mahyuddin, and Uli (2009) affirmed in their study the impact of students' adaptation to the university on their academic achievement. They discovered that students who face adjustment with difficulties tend to achieve lower grades while those who have smooth adaptation have higher grades. Social adaptation to the university is crucial for minority students to cope with their college life.

Consequently, physical activities can serve as an approach to socialization; they can enhance an individual's capacity to interact with social groups (Milroy 2010). The time spent on extracurricular activities in the university can be considered a socialized act of building friendships. In qualitative research conducted by Li and Zizzi (2018), engagement in students' physical activities served as the context where observations of peer-to-peer social behaviors happened. Researchers argued that multicultural friendships could be developed and strengthened by engaging in physical activities.

Near the end of their schooling, all the participants managed to get along well with their peers and boast about successfully adjusting to mainstream education. As a result of their adaptation scheme, they are also proud to affirm that their self-esteem has improved:

P1: "I have increased my level of self-esteem."

P2: "My self-esteem has improved."

P3: "There was a change in me. Now I can do the things I thought I could not do before."

P4: "My perspective in life has changed considering my experiences. Today, I know what to do because of the knowledge I gained."

P5: "I have done the things I thought I could not do at first. I am no longer shy, am I?"

Developing a high level of self-esteem would have a huge effect on the perception to study and easily adapt to the university. In a study conducted by Grant-Vallone et al. (2003) on the analysis of the effects of self-esteem, social support, and participation in student support services on students' adjustment and commitment to college, the results indicated that students who reported higher levels of self-esteem and more peer support had a better academic and social adjustment. In addition, students who more frequently utilized student support services and counseling reported higher social adjustment. Finally, students who were better adjusted to campus life were more likely to be committed to the goal of a college degree and more committed to their university.

To support this, Friedlander et al. (2007) studied social support, self-esteem, and stress as predictors of adjustment to university among first-year undergraduates. The researchers reported that increased social support from friends, but not from family, predicted improved adjustment. Decreased stress predicted improved overall, academic, personal-emotional, and social adjustment while increased global, academic, and social self-esteem predicted decreased depression and increased academic and social adjustment.

Social adjustment plays a critical role in student persistence at college most especially among the participants as proven in this study. The setting should be prepared for the incoming novice so that the initiation to mainstream society may not be too harsh and frustrating. Everybody has a role to play while witnessing this transition. The university's increasing concern for students' success in college should continue, and the comfort level of the underrepresented population should be raised.

V. DISCUSSION ON THEORIES AND IMPLICATIONS

The three emerging themes in this study—challenged yet motivated, offended yet inspired and rooted, and insecure yet socially adjusted—corroborate the Social Dominance Theory and Tinto's Student Retention Theory in several significant ways.

Social Dominance Theory (SDT) states that all "human societies tend to be structured as a group-based social hierarchy" (Sidanius and Pratto 2001). SDT provides a framework through which we can examine the dynamics that create and maintain group-based social hierarchies (Wilson 2017). Further, SDT classifies three kinds of groups based on hierarchies: age-based, gender-based, and arbitrary-set systems. Sidanius and Pratto (2011) further explain that the arbitrary-set system category consists of socially constructed categories such as clan, ethnicity, race, or any other socially relevant constructed group distinction. However, as humans organize themselves into groups, the distinction between the dominant groups and subordinate groups emerges. Here, the dominant group enjoys a large share of positive social value that includes material and symbolic things that people would like to have— political authority and power, nice homes, good health care, wealth, high social status, and access to quality education. By contrast, the subordinate social groups have a share of items with negative social value—limited political power, poor health care, high-risk, and low-status occupations, and poor housing and education. Behavioral asymmetry forms a hierarchical arrangement in which the dominant group remains on top and the subordinate group at the bottom.

The time the indigenous students began to assimilate themselves into the dominant world of the lowlanders, it follows that they need to put themselves under the power of the prevailing group. Moreover, the students experienced unfavorable conditions in the arbitrary-set system category based on the socially constructed distinction of race and ethnicity. Having been from the marginalized sector of society and with the inferior image inscribed in their indigenous identity, the participants found themselves hanging at the bottom. They are often victims of discrimination and bullying as experienced by most of the participants. As confirmed by Cialdini, Van Lange, Kruglanski, and Higgins (2012), SDT argues that intergroup oppression, discrimination, and prejudices are how human societies organize themselves as group-based hierarchies. As reported, the United Nations (2020) reiterates that indigenous and tribal communities are "consistently at the bottom of all social and economic indicators." The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) supported this fact by saying that minorities and indigenous peoples are often excluded from participation in socio-economic life, rarely have access to political power, and frequently encounter obstacles to manifesting their identity." This explains how relevant SDT is to the present findings of the study.

On the other hand, another theory that has a bearing on the current study is the Student Retention Theory by Vincent Tinto. Undergraduate retention is an institution of higher education's ability to retain a student from admission until graduation (Berger and Lyon, 2005). At the university level, the model proposed by Tinto and Cullen on student-institution integration explains the process of dropout/perseverance in the undergraduate setting. According to Tinto's theory, the decision to drop out of school emerges from a combination of different factors such as student characteristics and the degree of their academic, environmental, and social integration in an institution (Connolly 2017). Further, Connolly added that in Tinto's 1993 model, like his initial model, Tinto included pre-entry attributes and elements related to family background, skills, abilities, and prior schooling. Tinto argues that institutional climate and academic or financial factors are equally important to student retention (Janes 1997). The way the students integrate themselves into their academic and social life on campus would predict their retention more than any other factor, which in turn has an impact on their goals and institutional commitment.

Accordingly, Tinto in his theory cited two major forms of individual commitment—goal and institutional. Students who commit to their career goals will most likely succeed. The greatest factor to consider in attaining success is the participants' commitment to goal completion (Janes 1997). This is supported by Tinto's (1987) contention that individual commitment is central to degree completion.

The individual commitment to have a "better life" was a major factor in the goal of degree completion among minority students. This is reflected in the themes "challenged yet motivated" and "offended yet inspired." The kind of motivation the students have while studying is anchored on the inspiration coming from the family and the community where they come from. Levin and Levin (1991) support this when they found out that family background characteristics play a significant role

in at-risk student persistence. A strong commitment to succeed through education and the desire to elevate the family's poor condition and to extend help to the community were the goals set by the minority students a long way before they set into mainstream society. As minority students entered the university, their intentions and external commitments had a great impact on their goal commitment. These helped them successfully respond to those experiences (pleasant or unpleasant) they encountered at the university. This only proves Tinto's theory concerning this study because all the participants are on their way to finishing their respective degrees.

Another aspect of Tinto's theory (1993), which is related to the third theme "insecure yet socially adjusted," has been expanded from its initial model and includes the concept of academic and social integration, which emerges as a unifying theme for many of the studies. Here, the student's interaction with their social as well as academic environments is crucial to college success (Connolly 2017). Tinto (1993) revealed that "the students' sense of academic and social belonging impacts on retention and graduation and this sense of belonging is increased or decreased through interactions with the academic and social environments of the university." The positive and negative campus experiences tend to affect ultimate goals and overall commitments. According to Tinto's theory, positive experiences tend to increase integration, whereas negative experiences tend to weaken integration into the academic and/or social systems. However, Tinto (1993) emphasized that strong intentions or career goals can overpower the effect of negative experiences and poor integration into the culture of the institution.

The participants' strong commitment to their career goals is the motivating factor that made them overcome the negative experiences of discrimination. Through the years of their study, they were able to successfully increase their integration into the academic system because of the adjustments made in the university. Over time, they get used to college life. They were able to succeed through social adaptation, which was the key to survival. The positive result or experience of learning how to socialize, mingle, and get along well not only with the indigenous group but also with the lowlanders made it possible for the participants to develop relationships with their peers, make friends, and communicate with their new environment. Astin (1977) found that involvement with student peer groups as one important aspect of student involvement is the "single

most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years." The participants attested to the fact that the social adaptation they made had gained their confidence, which resulted in high self-esteem—an indication of growth and development, making them stay in the university.

The findings have implications for the programs and policies at the institutional level in providing inclusivity and sensitivity to the needs and aspirations of indigenous students. All the students experienced discrimination, which made the transition from an indigenous background to a more sophisticated "mainstream" society more challenging. As such, cultural diversity training may be provided first to the staff within the academe, which can be passed on later to the students just to create awareness of the thoughts, feelings, and motivations of the minority group. This concrete step may create an environment of ethnic inclusivity, receiving additional support from the people within the academe and, most importantly, from their peers. As the findings revealed, this helps support their coping mechanisms and boost their self-confidence and self-esteem. Different programs may be created to help ease the transition to the university, intensifying counseling, and student support services. In addition, social and recreational programs should be created to promote multiculturalism by displaying the art, literature, music, and the likes not only of the minority group but also of the diverse student populations belonging to different ethnic backgrounds and ancestry. This will pave the way to giving minority students a sense of belonging.

To better appreciate their stay in the university, the heads of different concerned offices can seek the input of indigenous students regarding policy planning and academic program development to meet their specific needs. An institutional minority advisory board should be established to serve as a platform that would address concerns and issues. As minority students are protected by the law against racial discrimination as stipulated in the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act of 1997, a law recognizing the specific needs of basic health and education of the Indigenous people, the university should consider the strong implementation of the policies on the violation of such law and come up with concrete and specific mandate to combat racism. Even the Philippine Constitution mandates the recognition and protection of the rights of the indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples (ICCs/IPs) within the framework of national unity and development.

Minority students must acquire quality education and have their specific needs met. This is to promote inclusivity and equity in the university.

VI. CONCLUSION

One thing is common among the experiences of the indigenous students in the university—everyone experienced discrimination. Even the review of literature and studies presented in this paper explored and captured those challenging experiences. Hence, this dilemma must be given proper attention by the university to help lessen the intensity of such experiences, if not eradicate them. As it has been emphasized, the persisting culture of discrimination prevented minorities from entering mainstream education. The findings indicate that the incidents were strongly felt during the first year of schooling; hence, an initial support system and guidance must be present during this time to introduce them to a culture entirely different from where they came from.

All the participants have with them their family and their community that serve as inspirations to move forward amidst poverty. Education is considered the "gateway" to a better life.

The sacrifice entailed in going through university life is not only for themselves but for their family and their indigenous community as well. Sacrifice it may seem, but it cannot be compared to the idea and hope that education could free them from discrimination and poverty.

Lastly, the students were able to survive through the proper adjustments they made in the university. Strong peer support and acceptance changed how they viewed themselves, and it helped improve their self-esteem.

The time they socially adapted themselves to their new culture and they started communicating and making friends, was also the time they soon realized they could do the things that seemed to be impossible before.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

A mentoring program that will introduce them to appropriate role models may be provided, and a support system is given by the students' representatives through the student council as an introduction to a "buddy system" to make the minority students feel more comfortable and at ease in their newly found environment.

Again, strong advocacy against racial or ethnic discrimination should be observed in the university for the protection of the rights and privileges of minority students, condemning any act of prejudice committed against them.

Coming from the marginalized sector of society, it is difficult financially for an indigenous family to send their children to school.

As such, as part of the university's concern for indigenous students, constant monitoring and evaluation of the availability and accessibility of scholarships, grants, and any other programs intended to help the minority in the financial aspects of their studies should be done periodically.

Financial help, as part of the university policy, should be available and accessible whenever possible.

A socialized program that involves the aspect of inclusivity should be tailored for minority students.

The program may help boost their confidence by showcasing their talents, skills, and even their own culture.

Sports programs, as some of the studies revealed, serve as an avenue for camaraderie and friendships through the interactions between and among students. Counseling programs are also welcome to thresh out the difficulties and issues encountered by minority students.

To conclude, these steps may further attract more indigenous students to take one step further in educating themselves, achieving their most cherished aspirations, and experiencing the life they once dreamed of for themselves, their families, and the community.

There will be more hopeful IPs who will take the road to actualizing their dreams by entering the academic world. In doing so, the indigenous students affirm the belief that joining the majority through education is a path to a better life.

But will education bring them to the "promised land"?

It may be recommended for future researchers to continue this kind of study once the minority students have successfully finished their respective degrees to capture their new set of experiences in the world of work, proving that education is indeed the key to a brighter future—for them and their families.

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