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Practices in the Mental Health Screening of Filipino Overseas Workers

MA. LEONORA VASQUEZ-DE JESUS

This study initially intended to present two areas related to the overseas employment of Filipino workers, i.e., (1) pre-employment practices, specifically the mental health screening practices and issues related thereto; and (2) the adjustment problems of workers who have been employed and are currently working in the Middle East. However, the efforts directed at the latter did not produce substantial data, because of some difficulties inherent in doing research work with this group of respondents. Because of these limitations, the present essay focuses its attention on present screening practices, with emphasis on the problems and issues involved therein; it does not intend to dwell on the issues regarding the economic advantages and disadvantages of overseas employment.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DATA ON OVERSEAS WORKERS

For the past nine years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of Filipino contract workers placed overseas. Official Ministry of Labor statistics indicate that from an average of about 2,000 workers placed per annum between 1969 to 1971, there was a sudden jump in number to 14,366 in 1972.

It is true that the sudden increase also reflects differences in data recording procedures before and after 1972. However, the fact remains that this type of temporary migration of contract

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workers has increased considerably and appears to be continuously growing. In the first quarter alone of 1977, a total of 25,105 workers were reported to have been placed abroad.

These contract workers are found in various countries all over the world, but since 1975 the Middle East has become the most important market for Filipino manpower, providing jobs for 15,383 Filipinos between 1975 and the first quarter of 1977. Out of this total 11,573 workers were sent to Saudi Arabia. The latest available OEDB statistics indicate that by the end of 1979, there were about 60,000 Filipino workers in thirteen Middle East countries, 49,000 being in Saudi Arabia.

The MOL statistics also show that about 40 percent of these workers are rank-and-file craftsmen, construction, or production process workers.

According to the latest report, the future growth of the Middle East labor market is likely to be even faster than in the seventies. An ILO report made by A.M. Farray on the migration between Arab countries indicates that the combined development plans of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Iraq call for spending \$243 billion through 1985. To implement these programs, these countries will need all the manpower they can get, roughly estimated at 1.5 million workers.

These demands imply that the Philippines will continue to export manpower to the Middle East for quite some time. Since its initiation in the seventies, this phenomenon has begun to affect the lives of many of the Filipino workers. Whereas prior to 1975, overseas work was mainly for professionals, now the doors have been opened to rank-and-file workers, and even to those with low educational attainment. The possibility of earning so much in dollars has raised the hopes of those whose income hardly enables them to survive. For those who have gone abroad, there has been a considerable improvement of living standards, with many of them being able to build their own homes after a year or two of work abroad.

NEED FOR MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING

Likewise, this situation has brought about an increase in the number of recruiting agencies, both legal and illegal. Many of these recruitment firms charge astronomical fees despite efforts of the

Ministry of Labor & Employment to regulate their operations. During the first two or three years, the recruitment process was not very systematic. Hardly any selection scheme or criteria were utilized. At most, the recruiter, or the employer himself, (in cases when he decides to do his own selection) simply relied on the skills qualification and physical fitness of the applicant.

However, reports of an increasing number of workers showing signs and symptoms of maladaptation, of inability to cope with the demands of a stressful situation, of inability to stay on the job, and in some cases even of serious behavioral disorders, have prompted some recruitment firms to adopt a procedure for serious mental health screening. The main reason for the adoption of mental health or psychological testing was economic rather than a serious concern for the welfare and well-being of the workers. For if a worker fails to complete the contract terms, the recruiter and the employer lose much in terms of transportation fees and other expenses. Therefore, since the major reason is financial, the recruiters see to it that the total cost of mental screening for *all* applicants is less than the cost of having *one* worker return before he completes the contract. This consideration has caused some of the problems presently encountered in screening practices.

At present, according to the records of the Bureau of Employment Services there are 551 registered recruitment firms. Many of the firms do their own mental health screening, but quite a number employ the services of professional psychological firms. Despite the importance and significance of the role of psychological screening, as well as the increasing demand for it, the practising psychologists involved in this kind of activity have not had any previous occasion to openly discuss its issues and problems.

MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING

As with other regular pre-employment testing procedures, this mental health screening also uses standard instruments and measures to determine a person's suitability for a position and to predict whether or not he will succeed on the job. However, unlike the former, it does not give much weight to the applicants' mental abilities, problem-solving capacities, and aptitudes for job applied for. Neither does it look for the more positive personality traits

such as leadership/supervisory capabilities, and the ability to maintain good interpersonal relations. As a specific type of psychological assessment, mental health screening only determines the individual's capacity to adjust and to cope with a stressful situation.

This capacity to adjust is the core of mental health screening. There may be several modes of adjusting, depending on the individual's personality patterns, but the important factor is that the individual is able to function normally, that is, he is able to satisfy the biological and social demands of his environment. In other words, the capacity to adjust refers to a person's ability to survive. For some psychologists, however, adjustment simply means the absence of mental illness.

How, then, is this ability to adjust or the absence of mental illness operationalized in terms of the mental health screening practices?

Before we discuss the actual practices, let us first look at the profile of the rank-and-file applicants usually tested.

PROFILE OF APPLICANTS TESTED

Based on a survey of 100 examinees out of almost 1000 records on file, most of the applicants are within the 31-43 age bracket: the youngest is around 25 years old, the oldest 48. About 73 percent are married, 27 percent single.

With regard to educational attainment, the data reveal that 22 percent finished only an elementary education, 42 percent are high school graduates, a negligible 5 percent finished college, and 19 percent have taken up a vocational/technical course.

At the time of application, 46 percent were employed, and the remaining 54 percent were jobless. Moreover, 32 percent had previous work experience in the Middle East, and many of them were having difficulty finding a suitable job locally.

The most interesting feature of these data is the low educational level of the applicants. This fact has caused a number of screening difficulties which will be discussed later.

Let us now discuss the kind of situation to which the type of individual must be able to adjust.

WORK CONDITIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The work conditions that are presented here are based on the reports given by workers who had worked in the Middle East. The most frequently mentioned difficulty is not, surprisingly enough, in relation to their social needs – separation from their families – but problems in relation to their biological needs. Specifically, they complained of the climate, of the extreme temperatures which made them physically uncomfortable. Secondly, they mentioned the difficulty in adjusting to the kinds of food that are available, the lack of water, and the physically demanding work assignments. Loneliness due to separation from families and friends came in only after the demanding physical environment. A few mentioned the absence of recreational facilities and the strict prohibition against alcoholic drink and fraternizing with local women.

Aside from these reports, there is not much known about the different working conditions. Most recruitment firms are not able to discuss this matter adequately and so the psychologist who is expected to decide on the tests to be given has very little information available.

MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING PRACTICES

Against this background of the type of applicants and the working conditions, let us now consider the practices of psychologists in their attempt to assess the applicants' capacity to adjust to this kind of a situation.

CRITERIA USED FOR SCREENING

It has been mentioned earlier that the major consideration in mental health screening is the individual's capacity to adjust to a stressful situation. This concept may be expressed in several ways such as one's ability to withstand pressure, the availability of inner resources, one's emotional strength or maturity, adaptability to various circumstances, or tolerance for frustration. No matter how it may be stated, the important point to be made is that for purpose of selecting the appropriate psychological tests and measures,

it is necessary to identify specific factors or indicators of the capacity to adjust.

In this connection, some psychologists involved in this line of practice were interviewed regarding their own methods.

On the matter of criteria, these psychologists mentioned several different factors, but most of them appeared to be merely a re-statement of the concept of adjustment. Some, however, did identify more concrete indicators such as the intensity of the individual's motivation to work abroad, his work history, and previous experience of overseas employment. Others consider specific psychological traits as related to, or predictive of, this ability to cope. Some of the traits mentioned are: the intensity of the need for affiliation, the level of aggressiveness, the tendency toward homosexuality, and the degree of conventionality or socialization level.

THE TESTS USED

Most of these practising psychologists use the same set or battery of tests. However, some administer only one or two while others give up to four or five different tests. According to one of the psychologists interviewed, the type and number of tests given may depend on the work load in the office.

The most frequently mentioned tests used are: the MMPI, the Draw a Person Test, the Sentence Completion Test, the Hand test, and the Luscher color test. Most psychologists, if not all, conduct an in depth interview after the tests.

PROCEDURE FOR TESTING

Usually, tests are given only when the employer or the principal specifically requests them. As earlier stated, some recruitment firms hire their own psychologists, while others send their applicants to professional psychological testing firms.

Those using the services of the testing firms usually send their applicants to the office of the firms. More often, the applicants are referred for psychological assessment after they have passed the physical and medical examinations. In some instances, the reverse is true, the procedure being dictated by relative cost of these examinations.

Testing usually takes from half a day to a day and a half, depending on the applicant's speed of responding and the number of tests given. Reports are ordinarily given between two to five days after the last testing day.

With regard to the report format, psychologists adopt various styles of preparing the psychological report. Some prefer a checklist type, while others use a qualitative evaluation. Despite the differences in format, most of those interviewed indicate that applicants are generally rated on a three or four point scale of varying degrees of recommendability.

PROBLEMS IN MENTAL HEALTH SCREENING

The application of psychological testing to these types of workers is a recent development in the field of psychological practice in the Philippines. This being so, the current practices are beset by a number of problems and limitations that necessitate serious attention from our psychologists, i.e., not only from those who are actively practising, but also from those doing research in the academe. The use of the tests also raises some issues that demand the consideration of our policy makers. The problems that have been raised by the practising psychologists have been grouped under various headings.

RECRUITMENT FIRM/PSYCHOLOGIST RELATIONSHIP PROBLEMS

When a recruitment agency requires the services of a psychologist for the screening of overseas workers, usually it does not have a clear idea of what to expect from the psychological report. The agency may give a general description of its requirements and state that it wants to find out if the workers are capable of withstanding the pressures of overseas work. In other words, the agency wants a test that will be able to predict the applicant's successful completion of his contract. However, aside from this, no additional information regarding the work conditions are provided. Unlike the regular pre-employment procedures, no job description is generally given. Because of their ignorance of the possible uses of psychological measures, many of the agencies ask for the inclusion of a liability clause in the contract with the psychologist. They want the psychologist to take full responsibility for the behavior of the

applicant once he is recommended. While we really must have some degree of confidence in the results of the assessment procedures, there are, on the other hand, situational factors that may significantly affect the worker's behavior, causing him to act in unexpected ways. The fact that there are things the psychologist cannot completely predict disheartens most of the client firms.

In some instances, this ignorance blocks any ability to appreciate the value of psychological assessment. For many, any kind of personal interview suffices to replace the psychological test. Moreover, many of the agencies cannot discriminate between a qualified and an unqualified psychologist, a valid and an invalid test, and a good or bad report. For instance, it has been reported that one psychologist issues a diploma to the applicants who have successfully passed the psychological examinations. Much to our surprise, this kind of a practice seems to be well-appreciated and sought after by the recruitment firms. According to them, the workers prefer the diploma.

Another type of problem encountered in this area is the use of personal influence in altering the results of the psychological test. There have been cases wherein the client firm has explicitly requested a change of the recommendation given, since the applicant is backed by somebody powerful. These instances test the integrity of the practising psychologist.

Lastly, many client firms usually settle for the lowest bidder for psychological testing services. They expect predictive reports, but they refuse to pay the cost of a good assessment procedure. What usually happens, then, is that psychologists do not hesitate to give any kind of simple test, valid or not.

These problems arising from the client firms' lack of understanding may then lead to the proliferation of malpractices, eventually causing a degradation of the psychological profession.

INSTRUMENTS/TEST MATERIALS' AVAILABILITY PROBLEM

According to interviews with the psychologists, the tests used are usually the same tests given for regular job applicants. At this time, no test especially designed for mental health screening of this group of workers has been constructed and validated. Moreover, even with the presently available tests, there are no adaptations made, nor have predictive validity studies been conducted.

It is apparent, then, that the present measures are wanting in several aspects. Many of the tests are in the English language, presenting difficulty for those who do not understand this language. Some testing agencies have Tagalog tests, but even these are not understood by those who do not come from the Tagalog region. In view of the problems encountered with the verbal tests, some psychologists have resorted to the use of projectives. However, our experience has shown that many of the applicants in this group do not have the capacity to develop imageries or form associations if they are given ambiguous stimuli. Their responses to the projectives are very minimal, and hardly revealing or discriminating.

Another problem is the possibility of test leakage. Because of the lack of research in test development in this line, there are also no alternative forms to the tests currently being used.

It would be ideal to have a predictive validity study conducted on the tests used. However, because of poor coordination between recruitment firms and testing agencies, as well as the difficulty in getting the data from those who have returned from abroad, this ambition appears to be presently unattainable.

Another alternative is the development of local norms or adaptations. This, however, may require the cooperation of different testing agencies who at present do not seem to have any opportunity to share any kind of data or information.

While the problems of instrumentation are numerous, the testing firms are trying to make do with their present resources, giving the tests that they consider useful enough at this stage of the development of this area.

PROBLEMS IN LACK OF COOPERATION

This lack of cooperation between different testing firms and their practising psychologists has partly been mentioned in the previous section in connection with the sharing of data. As of now, the testing firms are very careful about protecting the "secrets" of their trade, often refusing even to identify the tests they use. Because of this, it is very difficult to standardize the practices for the mental health screening of overseas workers. Moreover, as long as the trade secret is maintained, practice by

it is necessary to identify specific factors or indicators of the capacity to adjust.

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unqualified psychologists is possible since there are no requirements or standards to be met. The increase in number of these unqualified people is detrimental not only to the psychologists' profession but also potentially dangerous to the public that they are servicing.

ADMINISTRATION OF TESTS PROBLEMS

The other problems encountered by psychologists are the petty difficulties usually encountered in the course of their daily work. One problem is the possibility of one person taking the test for someone else. This possibility makes it very important to establish the true identity of the examinee-applicant. Another problem is the question of re-testing the same applicant in the hope of getting a better profile the next time around. A third problem worth mentioning is the situation in which the client firm sends in so many examinees on the same day that they create not only space problems for the psychologists but difficulties in maintaining the quality of the reports as well.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In consideration of the present practices and problems there are some questions that may be raised involving ethics. For example:

1. Should other firms, or other psychologists, re-test an applicant who has already been tested and rejected by another?
2. Should a psychologist service an illegally operating recruitment firm?
3. How do psychologists safeguard the confidentiality of their reports?
4. To whom are psychologists responsible — to the client firm or to the individual examinee?

These are but a few of the ethical considerations that may bother psychologists in the practice of their profession in this line.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The present data and the current trends indicate that overseas employment, particularly in the Middle East, is here to stay for some time. This implies that mental health screening will gain

more importance in the years to come. According to the presentation that has been given, our present practices can stand much improvement. However, before any substantial positive change can be implemented, certain conditions must be established:

1. Psychologists in this country must launch an information campaign to enlighten the general public, especially the client firms, on the nature of the uses and the limitations of psychological tests and measures.
2. Practising psychologists in this line of work must organize themselves to protect their own interests as well as to upgrade the quality of their services by setting minimum standards and qualifications for psychologists. To give this more impetus, this move must be coursed through the Psychological Association of the Philippines. Once these standards and qualifications are organized, a freer exchange of data may be expected, and better tests could be developed.
3. Research in this area must be encouraged and given support by the government. Otherwise, no considerable improvement can be expected in the mental health screening practices in this country. As a start, the government agencies responsible for regulating the activities of the recruitment firms must set up suitable machinery through which data from the overseas workers, including those who have returned, can be gathered.

These are but a few of the concrete steps that have to be undertaken.