

Seeing through the Filipino Glass Children: Lived Experiences of Typically Developing (TD) Siblings to Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Isabela

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ABSTRACT

Glass Children are siblings of a person with special needs. Current research on this population remains limited. Consequently, the impact of their complex experiences and unique needs is often overlooked, particularly within the Philippines. Employing a phenomenological framework, the purpose of this study was to investigate the lived experiences and family life of Filipino “Glass Children” in terms of their family dynamics and routines and its impact in their inter and intrapersonal development. Photo-elicitation interviews were used to generate rich, detailed depiction and descriptions of the phenomenon. Thematic analysis subsequently illuminated five distinct themes; participants reported: 1) feelings of being “different” from peers, 2) emotional and psychological struggles due to the internalization of family roles or life conditions, 3) financial and therapy-related problems 4) the journey behind developing a growth mindset, and lastly 5) receiving and giving social support. Findings of this study shed light on the cruciality of processing the experiences of typically developing siblings, hence an urge to also address their psychological and social needs. Furthermore, these findings support the use of a family-centered approach and family education in therapy services when working with individuals with ASD and tailoring interventions to support the needs of all.

Keywords: siblings, lived experiences, typically developing siblings, family life

I. INTRODUCTION

The sibling relationship is often considered as the most significant and enduring familial relationship, to which the sibling relationship typically involves numerous mutual benefits (Sexana & Adamsons, 2013). However, this common pattern may not fully apply to sibling relationships where one sibling has a disability.

One of the most common developmental disorders that start from childhood, persisting through adulthood is Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). ASD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. About 1 in 100 children has

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autism, according to the World Health Organization. In the Philippines, the Autism Society Philippines in 2024 reported that approximately 1.2 million Filipinos are on the spectrum, or at least one in 100 Filipinos being diagnosed for ASD with varying levels across ages.

ASD pose unique challenges, benefits and difficulties to the family including the typically developing (TD) siblings (Viswanathan, Kishore, & Sheshadri, 2022). Glass Children, a colloquial term for TD siblings coined by Alicia Maples in her TEDx Talk, characterizing *TD siblings like a glass; not because they are fragile, but because parents and other people “look right through us”*. This term had recently resurfaced through viral videos and blogs across social media with people raising awareness on Glass Children, their experiences and support needs.

Glass children or glass siblings, often experience high levels of depression, anxiety, and stress due to the demands of providing sibling care (Shivers & Dykens, 2017; Shivers & McGregor, 2018; Sommantico et al., 2020). Despite these challenges, these siblings also report higher levels of patience and compassion (Lee et al., 2021), a strong desire to help others (Camfield et al., 2016), and higher levels of empathy and tolerance than those without a sibling with ASD (Lee et al., 2021).

Thus, this paper explored the lived experiences of typically developing (TD) siblings in Isabela, Philippines, who have siblings with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This emanates from the need to better understand the types of support they need, as well as reinforce the literature and resources for family caregivers of children with special needs.

II. METHODS

A qualitative design, using phenomenological framework was employed in this study to explore the lived experiences of typically developing (TD) siblings. A photo-elicitation approach was used in order to facilitate introspection and reflection during the data gathering process. Semi-structured interview including questions on caregiving, feelings related to being a glass sibling, and how participants were impacted by having siblings with ASD. This was then used to reinforce the experiences of the participants, generating rich, detailed descriptions of their experiences.

The study utilized Purposive Sampling, to identify and select participants. The researcher purposefully selected willing individuals with knowledge of some experience or phenomenon, employing the following inclusion criteria: (a) must be 14-19 years, (b) living with a brother or sister with ASD, and (c) must be residing in Isabela. Snowball sampling was then to select additional participants through its referral mechanism.

A. Ethical Considerations

Participants were not obligated to take part in this study. It was entirely up to the respondent whether or not to take part. As a participant, they were always free to leave at any moment. There were no expenses associated with their withdrawal from the study. They were also oriented that data would be returned or erased if in case the respondent decided to withdraw before the data collection was finished.

Responses to the interview and photos used were stored and treated with absolute confidentiality and complete anonymity. The possibility of a breach of privacy was considered. As a result, every effort was made by the researcher to preserve the confidentiality of research data. Code names or numbers were assigned to identify the participants. The gathered data were only used throughout the study's processing and for academic purposes, which excluded the respondents' personal information.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section discussed the interpretation and analysis of data of the study to report the information on the exploration of the lived experiences of TD children to siblings with ASD. Demographic profiling was conducted followed by the main data gathering method using the photo-elicitation approach, particularly the storyboarding technique, wherein pre-set photos were used in order to facilitate conversation during the interview.

Table 1.

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant's Pseudonym	Participant's Sex	Participant's Age	Sex of Sibling with ASD	Age of Sibling with ASD
Dwayne	Male	16	Male	9
Aly	Female	19	Male	13
Cherry	Female	14	Male	5
Megan	Female	16	Female	8
Justin	Male	18	Male	10

Participants of this study are five (5) adolescents, with ages ranging from 14-19 years old. Among them are three females and two males. All participants have siblings diagnosed with ASD, with ages ranging from 5 to 13 years old. Most of the participants have male siblings with ASD (4 out of 5). This could reflect a higher prevalence of ASD in males, which is a well-established finding in ASD research and prevalence over the years (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

After collecting the demographic profiles of the participants, pre-set photos were presented in order to facilitate conversation during the interview. Sample interview questions include 1) To what extent do you relate with what is happening in this picture? 2) What comes to your mind when you saw this picture? 3) How do you cope when your

sibling is having a meltdown? Thematic Analysis was then used to generate themes and patterns from the answers of the participants.



Figure 1. Pre-set Photos used for the Interview

A. Trustworthiness of the Study

Member checks and peer debriefing were employed to enhance the credibility of this study. Member checks were conducted following the transcribing of interview data. In this study, the participants had an opportunity to review and give feedback around comments on their transcripts. Though their feedback was minimal, the process was essential to ensuring the integrity of the information they shared regarding their experiences as glass siblings. Peer debriefing was also used to address credibility.

Peer debriefing was also used to strengthen credibility. In this study, a field expert in developmental psychology, psychology professor, and special education teacher carefully reviewed the interview data, codes, and categories that emerged from the analysis of data.

B. Thematic Findings and Discussions

The findings from this study were congruent with the existing literature on glass siblings. Four themes emerged from the participant interviews: (1) feelings of being “different” from peers, (2) emotional and psychological struggles due to the internalization of family roles or life conditions, (3) the journey behind developing a growth mindset, and (4) receiving and giving social support.

1. Feelings of being “different” from peers

This theme extends beyond simply feeling different; it encompasses a complex range of emotions and experiences. TD siblings may feel isolated because their friends and peers don't truly understand their family life and the unique challenges they face.

They may feel pressure to overachieve or act as a “role model” to compensate for their sibling’s difficulties. This can lead to internalized feelings of guilt, resentment, or even shame. They might also struggle with social comparisons, feeling like their family is “abnormal” or that they are missing out on typical childhood experiences. This sense of difference can impact their identity formation, self-esteem, and social relationships.

For example, Megan expressed thoughts on comparing her experiences as a teenager with her peers, which may lead to self-pity and other self-defeating thoughts at its onset.

MEGAN: *“Madalas, parang nararamdaman ko na ako lang yung may pinaka mabigat na pinagdadaanan dahil sa kapatid ko. Madami akong hindi nagagawa na gusto ko dahil kailangan unahin siya. Minsan, sobrang nakaka-inggit yung friends ko na walang inaalala. May freedom sila sa oras nila. Pwede silang gumala, magbakasyon, matulog at gumising ng late. Ako, parang palaging nagmamadali at aligaga. Tapos wala pang nakakaintindi saakin, sinasabihan lang ako na kj [kill joy] pag hindi ako nakaka attend sa birthday ng classmates ko.”* (“Often, it feels like I'm the only one going through the heaviest burden because of my sibling. There are many things I want to do that I can't because he/she needs to be prioritized. Sometimes, I really envy my friends who have nothing to worry about. They have freedom with their time. They can go out, go on vacation, sleep in and wake up late. Me, it feels like I'm always rushing and busy/flustered. And then, nobody understands me; I just get called a kj [killjoy] when I can't attend my classmates' birthdays”.)

Megan’s statement reflects this feeling of carrying a heavier burden than her peers. Previous studies confirm that this difference can stem from various factors, such as increased responsibilities at home, altered family dynamics, social stigma, or a lack of understanding from others about their family situation (Sexana & Adamsons, 2013). TD siblings may feel like they can't relate to their peers' experiences or that they have to keep their family life private, leading to feelings of loneliness and being misunderstood.

2. Emotional and psychological struggles due to the internalization of family roles or life conditions

This theme delves into the internal psychological processes that TD siblings undergo. The demands of having a sibling with ASD can force them to take on responsibilities beyond their developmental stage, such as assisting with caregiving, mediating conflicts, or acting as a “parentified child.” This can lead to emotional parentification, where they suppress their own needs to prioritize the family's. They may also experience anxiety

about the future, particularly regarding their sibling's long-term care and their own role in it. These internalized struggles can manifest in various ways, including anxiety disorders, depression, or difficulty forming healthy attachments.

ALY: *I think when I realized that I will be my brother's forever home when my parents will pass, it just turned me into this person who is always anxious of the future; to always make plans ahead, and be always in control because that is what works for my brother. Parang at an early age, talagang na-orient na kami na responsibility namin siya, lalo na ako. Kaya hindi ko din kaya, yung konsesnya ko, pag iiwan ko siya magisa, kasi I love him and he is my responsibility. Lalo na sa financial, kasi alam ko gaano ka-importante na may pera lalo na para sa therapy at mga gamot niya. Hindi naman kami mayaman, pero I somehow want to be really wealthy in that way, maitataguyod ko siya ng mas madali kesa sa ngayon. ("I think when I realized that I will be my brother's forever home when my parents pass, it just turned me into this person who is always anxious about the future; always making plans ahead, and always needing to be in control because that is what works for my brother. It's like at an early age, we were really oriented that he was our responsibility, especially mine. That's why I can't bear it – my conscience can't take it – if I leave him alone, because I love him and he is my responsibility. Especially financially, because I know how important it is to have money, particularly for his therapy and medications. We're not rich, but I somehow want to be really wealthy so that, in that way, I can support him more easily than I can now.").*

Aly's statement illustrates how taking on family roles and responsibilities, such as becoming a future caregiver for her brother, can lead to anxiety and a need for control. And according to recent students, these siblings may experience a range of emotions, including worry, guilt, resentment, and pressure to achieve. Her concern for financial needs are also congruent to the current economic needs of families taking care of ASD Individuals, as reported by (Quilendrino et al., 2022). They may also internalize family stress or feel pressure to compensate for their sibling's challenges, impacting their own emotional well-being and potentially leading to mental health concerns (Lee et. al., 2021).

3. The journey behind developing a growth mindset

This theme highlights the potential for positive psychological development. While facing challenges, TD siblings often develop resilience, empathy, and a strong sense of responsibility. They may become more adaptable, patient, and understanding of individual differences. The experience can foster a growth mindset, where they view

challenges as opportunities for learning and development. This journey is not without its difficulties, but it can lead to increased maturity, self-awareness, and a deeper appreciation for life. These positive outcomes can be fostered through supportive family environments, access to mental health resources, and opportunities for self-expression.

JUSTIN: “My brother doesn’t know how to talk, and he cannot communicate well, that’s why he always throws tantrums. We feel frustrated as a family, but it takes me as the *panganay* [eldest] to remind us that tomorrow is another day. I can also say that I being with my brother made me the person I am today. It has made me more independent, hardworking, compassionate, empathetic and driven. And because of him, I have been more drawn to Christ, and deepen my faith.”

Justin’s statement exemplifies how dealing with challenging situations, such as his brother's tantrums, can foster a sense of responsibility and a positive outlook. All participants reported high levels of empathy, patience, and deep understanding both toward their siblings, but also toward the circumstances of others. Megan also shared that developing empathy has “helped me realize my advocacy to help those who are in the same situation that we have.”

These findings are aligned with the study of Hanvey et. al., (2022), stating that Glass siblings often learn valuable life lessons about empathy, patience, and acceptance. They may develop strong coping mechanisms, problem-solving skills, and a mature perspective on life. Though the experiences of glass siblings vary greatly, a common connecting thread is an extent to which these individuals feel they have learned and grown from their circumstances.

4. Receiving and giving social support.

This theme emphasizes the critical role of social connections in navigating the challenges. TD siblings need a strong support network to share their experiences, validate their emotions, and receive guidance. However, researches have shown that glass siblings generally lack strong support systems and few social connections with individuals they feel they can turn to. In her interview, Cherry expressed her need for social support, and her desire to be able to support others.

CHERRY: *Nung nagstart kami magpa therapy intervention, nakita ko na sobrang konti pala talaga ng mga family, lalo na dito sa province. At that time, parang hindi pa “sikat” yung Autism, at konti palang talaga yung nagpapa therapy tulad namin. Kaya parang wala din kami masyadong nakakausap, minsan yung mga nakakasabay lang naming magpa therapy, pero hindi naman palagi.*

Kaya sabi ko, gusto ko din sana makatulong sa ganitong paraan; na maging support sa iba. Sinubukan ko magstart sa social media, sa chats and facebook groups, pero hindi parin enough. Kaya kahit may online groups, yung physical na groups na nagmemeet, parang sa church ko lang nararanasan. Kasi kahit mga relatives naming, minsan hindi parin nila maintindihan, natatakot parin sila. ("When we started seeking intervention, I saw how few people like us there were in this community, especially here in the province. At that time, it seemed like Autism wasn't "well-known" yet, and there were really only a few people undergoing therapy like us. That's why it felt like we didn't have many people to talk to; sometimes just the ones we encountered during therapy sessions, but not always. So I thought, I also wanted to help in this way – to be a support for others. I tried starting on social media, in chats and Facebook groups, but it still wasn't enough. So even though there are online groups, the physical groups that meet up... it feels like I only experience that in my church. Because even our relatives, sometimes they still don't understand; they are still afraid.").

This finding is strengthened by narratives from glass siblings who emphasized the importance of having a strong network while caring for siblings with ASD (Lee et. al., 2021). Cherry's statement shows how seeking and providing support can be crucial for navigating the challenges of having a sibling with ASD. These siblings may benefit from support groups, therapy, or connections with others who understand their experiences. They may also find themselves becoming advocates for their siblings and raising awareness about ASD within their communities. Building a strong support network can help them feel less isolated, validate their feelings, and provide a sense of belonging. For glass siblings, having a strong social support system can make an impactful difference in alleviating anxiety and feelings of depression, as well as decreasing isolation.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study explored the lived experiences of typically developing (TD) adolescent siblings of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in Isabela, Philippines, often referred to as "Glass Children." The findings illuminate a complex reality characterized by four primary themes: (1) feelings of being "different" from peers, (2) emotional and psychological struggles due to the internalization of family roles, (3) a journey toward developing a growth mindset, and (4) receiving and giving social support.

These findings are largely congruent with existing international literature, yet they also offer nuances specific to the Filipino context. The sense of being different and the associated loneliness, exemplified by Megan's narrative, aligns with research highlighting how altered family dynamics and lack of peer understanding contribute to

isolation among TD siblings (Sexana & Adamsons, 2013). Similarly, the emotional and psychological struggles, particularly Aly's profound anxiety about future caregiving and financial responsibilities, resonate with studies documenting increased risks for anxiety and depression in this population (Lee et al., 2021) and underscore the specific economic pressures faced by families supporting individuals with ASD in the Philippines (Quilendrino et al., 2022). While these challenges suggest potential long-term impacts on mental health and life trajectories, requiring further longitudinal investigation, they are not the whole story.

Consistent with findings by Hanvey et al. (2022), participants like Justin demonstrated remarkable growth, developing empathy, responsibility, and coping mechanisms despite adversity. This journey towards a growth mindset, where participants learned valuable life lessons and drew strength even from challenging circumstances (including deepening faith, as Justin mentioned), highlights the potential for positive adaptation. However, the crucial role of social support, emphasized by Cherry's experience and supported by literature (Lee et al., 2021), appears particularly challenging within the studied context. Cherry's account points to limited community resources and understanding, even among relatives, suggesting that while the need for support is universal, its availability and nature may be culturally influenced. Elements like Justin's reference to his role as *panganay* (eldest) and Cherry's reliance on church communities hint at specific Filipino cultural factors shaping these experiences, warranting further cross-cultural exploration.

In essence, this study confirms that Filipino TD siblings of children with ASD navigate a demanding path marked by unique stressors but also opportunities for significant personal growth. It underscores the urgent need to look "through the glass" and recognize their distinct needs, validating their experiences and providing targeted support systems, as outlined in the call to action. By acknowledging both the challenges and the resilience inherent in their experiences, we can better support the well-being of the entire family unit within the Filipino community and beyond.

Call to Action

Based on previous research examined in the literature review as well as the findings of this project, there is a need for looking at disability awareness as a social justice issue that is addressed in schools, local government units (LGUs) and public and mental health sectors. Disability awareness—including neurodiversity, less visible, and invisible disabilities—should be included not only in school curriculum but in Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives as well. Parent education, aimed toward parents of students receiving special education services, could include topics concerning siblings and sibling interactions. Direct sibling support interventions could be provided in schools

through a staff delivered one-to-one model like Sibbs Talk or in hosting a program like Sibshops that involves peer support in a recreational setting.

V. DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this research.

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