



Beyond Obligation: An Interpretative Phenomenological Study of Utang na Loob Among Female Adoptees

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Abstract

The qualitative study “Utang na Loob from an Adopted Child’s Perspective” explored the lived experiences of adopted children, focusing on gratitude, acceptance, and reciprocity. Semi structured interviews were conducted with five female adoptees aged 20–30 from Batangas, Philippines. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used because it is well suited to examining how individuals make meaning of deeply personal and relational experiences. Since utang na loob involves layered emotions of gratitude, reciprocity, and identity negotiation, IPA provided the lens to capture both lived realities and the interpretative processes through which adoptees understand familial bonds. Four major themes emerged: (1) Fulfillment in Social Bonds, emphasizing supportive relationships; (2) Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude, reflecting identity embrace and appreciation; (3) Reciprocal Devotions, highlighting the desire to return love and support; and (4) Consistent Expression of Appreciation, underscoring acknowledgment of parental sacrifices. Existing qualitative and cultural studies on utang na loob have mainly examined biological families or broader Filipino social ties, leaving a gap in understanding its expression within adoptive families. This study addresses that gap by centering on female adoptees’ perspectives, extending the discourse beyond blood relations. The findings advance qualitative scholarship in social science and cultural psychology by reframing utang na loob as a heartfelt response rooted in love, reciprocity, and enduring gratitude rather than obligation. This shows how Filipino values adapt to diverse family structures and enrich qualitative research by revealing nuanced processes of identity formation, emotional negotiation, and relational reciprocity in adoptive contexts.

Keywords: *Utang na Loob, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Adoption Studies, Cultural Values, Filipino Family Relations, Utang na Loob, Gratitude, Acceptance, Appreciation, Emotion*

INTRODUCTION

Adoption creates a unique familial bond that extends beyond biological ties, offering children a sense of belonging, identity, and emotional security within the care of chosen parents. In the Philippine social welfare and family development context, adoption functions as a legally and socially recognized mechanism for providing permanent family care to children who are unable to remain with their biological families. Within this setting, adoptive relationships are deeply shaped by *utang na loob*, a core Filipino cultural value commonly understood as a “debt of gratitude.” More than a social expectation, utang na loob reflects a moral and relational commitment to honor acts of care and kindness through enduring loyalty, appreciation, and devotion rather than material repayment (Gundran et al., 2022). As a lived experience, utang na loob informs how individuals interpret relationships, transforming received love and support into long-term responsibility and mutual commitment.

Within Sikolohiyang Pilipino, utang na loob is closely linked to Virgilio Enriquez’s Kapwa Theory, which emphasizes shared identity, unity, and mutual recognition. Kapwa underscores the interconnectedness of the self and the other, situating *utang na loob* not as a burdensome obligation

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but as a sincere expression of gratitude that strengthens interpersonal bonds (City et al., 2022). In the context of adoption, Filipino adopted children may interpret their adoptive parents' acceptance, sacrifice, and nurturing through this cultural lens, fostering a desire to reciprocate through respect, loyalty, and service. Consequently, adoption is reframed from a purely legal or social arrangement into a culturally meaningful relationship grounded in shared humanity, moral responsibility, and relational depth.

Despite the recognized importance of *utang na loob* within Filipino family life, existing literature has largely confined its analysis to biological family relationships, where gratitude and moral obligation are traditionally anchored in blood ties. This focus leaves limited understanding of how *utang na loob* is experienced, negotiated, and sustained within adoptive family settings in the Philippines, where kinship is formed through choice, care, and social commitment rather than lineage. Addressing this gap, the present study offers a theoretical contribution by extending Enriquez's Kapwa Theory and the concept of *utang na loob* to non-biological kinship. In doing so, it demonstrates that shared identity (*kapwa*) and moral indebtedness are not inherently tied to consanguinity but are cultivated through sustained practices of care, acceptance, and mutual recognition within adoptive families.

Guided by an interpretative phenomenological approach, this research examines the lived experiences of Filipino adopted children to explore how *utang na loob* is formed, interpreted, and expressed within adoptive family contexts. By centering adoptees' narratives, the study deepens qualitative understanding of how Filipino moral values are enacted in everyday family life. Practically, the findings offer valuable insights for social workers, adoption practitioners, and family development professionals by illustrating how culturally grounded values shape adoptees' sense of belonging, reciprocity, and moral responsibility. These insights may inform culturally responsive adoption assessments, counseling interventions, and post-adoption support programs that recognize *utang na loob* as a relational and empowering resource rather than a source of coercive obligation. Collectively, the study contributes to *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* and qualitative family research by advancing a culturally situated understanding of kinship as a dynamic, relational, and value-laden process shaped by shared humanity, moral commitment, and lived experience.

To provide direction for the inquiry, the study established clearly articulated research objectives to maintain analytical focus and coherence in examining the lived experiences of Filipino wives residing with their in-laws within multigenerational households. Specifically, the study sought to: (1) describe the lived experiences of adopted children relative to the Filipino concept "Utang na Loob."; (2) identify the core themes that emerge from their narratives; and (3) develop recommendations grounded in participants' accounts that may inform responsive recommendation.

Guided by these objectives, the study was anchored on the following central research question:

"What is the essence of the lived experience of adopted children relative to Utang na Loob?"

To further deepen and support the exploration of the central question, the following subsidiary questions were likewise formulated:

1. How do adopted children describe their experiences?
2. What salient themes emerge from the responses of adopted children?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fulfillment from Nurturing and Strengthening Social Bonds

Adoptive parents play a critical role in forming emotional bonds that significantly impact children's emotional and behavioral outcomes. Children's emotional well-being improves when parents practice self-kindness and mindful parenting, indicating that parental emotional regulation directly supports adoptees' adjustment (Rato et al., 2024). Parental support has also been linked to increased positive affect and decreased perceived stress, anxiety, and depression, whereas support from friends does not show similar effects, highlighting the unique importance of parental involvement in children's emotional regulation (Acoba, 2024).

Strong emotional bonds within adoptive families further provide foundational support for children's academic, psychological, and social development. Roman et al. (2025) emphasize that adaptability in parenting is essential for nurturing children's academic success, emotional well-being, and social competence. Experiencing acceptance and feeling valued by adoptive parents enhances the likelihood of forming strong social ties and attaining higher life satisfaction in adulthood, underscoring the long-term benefits of supportive family environments (Melero et al., 2023). Additionally, these adoption experiences are deeply emotional and carry personal significance, shaping the distinctive perspectives adoptees hold about their adoption journey (Dias, 2023). Collectively, these findings demonstrate the significance of emotional support, open communication, and trust in adoptive parents for sustaining long-term psychological health in adoptees. Fulfillment from nurturing bonds refers to the emotional satisfaction children gain from consistent care and support from their adoptive parents. This initial experience helps children recognize parental care as a moral and emotional debt, laying the foundation for *utang na loob*.

Gradual Path to Deep Appreciation

Development of gratitude among adoptees represents a gradual emotional journey, supporting personal growth and resilience. Jiang (2022) notes that gratitude facilitates post-traumatic growth by helping individuals process experiences, regulate emotions, build social support, and achieve personal development. Gratitude also influences the relationship between happiness and resilience, highlighting its central role in emotional well-being and adaptation (Llenares et al., 2020).

Gratitude can be conceptualized as comprising two dimensions: benevolence, which reflects the emotional experience of thankfulness, and reciprocity, which involves returning a favor or expressing appreciation through actions (Navarro & Tudge, 2020). Parent-child relationships play a pivotal role in fostering gratitude, which subsequently enhances children's psychological and overall well-being (Obeldobel & Kerns, 2021). While some parents believe that children have an innate sense of gratitude, research indicates that this capacity can be strengthened through guidance and intentional parenting practices, emphasizing the role of family interactions in shaping gratitude development (Hussong et al., 2022). Together, these findings suggest that gratitude emerges gradually as adoptees reflect on experiences and observe the care and sacrifices of their adoptive parents. Gradual appreciation reflects the process by which children internalize this moral debt over time, transforming early uncertainty into heartfelt gratitude. Repeated experiences of parental sacrifice and support deepen understanding and foster reflective acknowledgment of their parents' care.

Power of Reciprocal Devotion in Care and Support

The relationship between parents and children goes both ways, with children reciprocating the care, support, and attention provided by their adoptive parents. Dittman et al. (2025) argue that children's engagement in supportive behaviors, respect, and shared time contributes to stronger

family bonds. Although adoption offers stability and support, it also introduces challenges that require attentive care, while simultaneously providing children opportunities to express devotion and reinforce familial relationships (Berman et al., 2025).

Parental attitudes and effective communication shape children's emotional responses and their capacity for reciprocal devotion. Positive parental behaviors encourage children to provide love and support in return Wright et al. (2024). Qualitative studies reveal that children are more likely to engage in reciprocal behaviors when parents maintain consistent care and narrative openness, fostering attachment and trust (Goldberg et al., 2023). Cultural frameworks, such as filial piety, further influence children's expressions of respect and care, with moral and social expectations guiding reciprocal behaviors in diverse contexts (Lin et al., 2022). These findings underscore that reciprocal devotion is both a natural response to parental support and a culturally shaped practice that strengthens family bonds. These are behavioral expression of *utang na loob*, where children give back through support, respect, and dedication. It shows that gratitude extends beyond feelings to concrete actions that reinforce parent-child bonds.

Foster Lasting Relationships and Emotional Well-Being

Expressions of gratitude toward adoptive parents serve as critical mechanisms for reinforcing emotional closeness and long-term developmental outcomes. Lo and Grotevant (2020) emphasize that open, supportive communication about adoption strengthens the emotional bond between parent and child. Adopted children frequently demonstrate deep gratitude, recognizing the love, stability, and sense of belonging that their adoptive families provide (The Attachment Project, 2021). This appreciation reflects not only emotional closeness but also an understanding of the parents' role in shaping positive life outcomes, highlighting how gratitude functions as both an emotional and cognitive acknowledgment (Binoy et al., 2021).

Parental support fosters resilience, supports identity formation, and promotes healthy adjustment, which in turn strengthens children's gratitude and loyalty (Rusthon, 2021). Furthermore, gratitude serves as a protective factor, enhancing psychological well-being and promoting resilience in the face of challenges, demonstrating its long-term developmental significance (Scott et al., 2021). Taken together, these studies indicate that gratitude in adoptive families contributes not only to immediate emotional closeness but also to enduring psychological growth, resilience, and secure relational bonds. Fulfilling *utang na loob* strengthens long-term relationships and promotes emotional security, resilience, and identity development. Children who express gratitude and reciprocate care enhance both family bonds and their own psychological well-being.

Kapwa Theory and *Utang na Loob*, central concepts in Filipino psychology, serve as theoretical benchmarks for understanding the experiences of adopted children. Kapwa emphasizes shared identity, social connectedness, and mutual recognition, providing a framework to examine how an adopted child develops a sense of belonging, acceptance, and selfhood within adoptive families (Maninang, 2025). It highlights that the child's identity is not formed in isolation but through relational ties that foster empathy, cooperation, and social harmony. *Utang na Loob* underscores gratitude, reciprocity, and moral responsibility, illustrating how cultural obligations shape family relationships and emotional bonds, influencing how adopted children perceive and respond to support, care, and expectations from adoptive parents (Marco et al., 2025). While existing adoption studies focus on attachment, emotional security, and reciprocity, many rely on Western frameworks that prioritize individual autonomy and nuclear family structures, often neglecting cultural values such as collective identity, interdependence, and relational obligation that are central to Filipino society. Using Kapwa and *Utang na Loob* as theoretical benchmarks addresses this gap, offering a culturally grounded lens to better understand how Filipino adoptees

navigate family dynamics, internalize cultural values, and construct their sense of identity, belonging, and responsibility within adoptive households.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a Qualitative Exploratory Research design, specifically an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as defined by [Creswell and Creswell \(2018\)](#). It involves a small number of participants who are purposefully selected based on their ability to provide detailed and meaningful insights related to the research topic, to explore the lived experiences of adopted children. The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) involved conducting open-ended interviews and analyzing participants' responses to identify emergent themes, enabling the researcher to interpret how individuals made sense of their experiences within personal and social contexts ([Smith & Nizza, 2021](#)). The exploratory nature of the study allowed an in-depth understanding of how adopted children interpret and experience *utang na loob* within their adoptive families.

The study involved five (5) female participants aged 20–30 years old. In identity and cultural psychology research, choosing participants aged 20–30 is essential, as this age range represents individuals who are legally adults yet still navigating a developmental stage significant to the study ([Dahal et al., 2024](#)). By focusing on this group, researchers ensure that participants have reached adulthood while continuing to experience formative processes related to identity and cultural development. Participants were recruited through Snowball Sampling; this sampling technique was appropriate as adopted individuals may be difficult to access and are more likely to participate when referred by trusted peers. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was reached.

Data were gathered through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Ethical standards were observed through informed consent and data privacy agreements. Interviews were conducted outside school premises and were audio-recorded with participants' permission to ensure accuracy. Data were analyzed following established IPA procedures ([Smith & Nizza, 2021](#)). Transcripts were read repeatedly for familiarization, followed by initial noting. Emergent themes were developed within each case and then clustered into superordinate themes. A cross-case analysis was conducted to identify shared patterns while preserving individual meanings. To ensure the quality and credibility of the qualitative findings, key trustworthiness criteria were addressed. Credibility was established via member checking and peer debriefing. Dependability was ensured by maintaining a clear documentation of the research procedures. Confirmability was supported through reflexive awareness to minimize research bias, while transferability was enhanced by providing sufficient contextual details of the participants and study setting.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study involved five (5) female adoptive children, aged 20 to 30, residing in and around Batangas, Philippines. All participants expressed a sense of *utang na loob* toward their adoptive parents and were willing to openly share their personal emotional experiences. Their narratives provided rich insights into how gratitude, relational obligations, and family dynamics are lived and experienced within their adoptive homes. [Islam & Aldaihani \(2022\)](#) explains that qualitative research prioritizes depth of understanding over generalizability. They note that sample sizes ranging from 5 to 25 participants are common, especially in phenomenological, where the goal is to explore lived experiences in rich detail. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012, the names of the Participants are kept confidential; hence, the names appearing in Table 1 are presented using their code names.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents

Participant	Age	Sex
A	30	Female
B	20	Female
C	22	Female
D	20	Female
E	24	Female

The study drew on data from participants' personal lived experiences as well as comparable accounts provided, which served as key methods of inquiry. Consequently, the research was framed around the central guiding question:

"What is the essence of the lived experience of adopted children relative to Utang na Loob?"

Meanwhile, the corollary question has been answered in the discussion below:

Corollary Question No. 1: How do adopted children describe their experiences?

Interview Question 1: Can you describe your overall lived experiences growing up with your adoptive parents?

Table 2. Annotated Exemplar on Lived Experiences Growing up with Adoptive Parents

Participants	Significant Statement
C	<i>"... our entire time together was touching and meaningful."</i>
E	<i>"...they are very nurturing and supportive...they welcomed me into their home and treated me like their own child."</i>

The participants were asked about their overall lived experience as an adopted child. Participants described feeling nervous at first but ultimately fulfilled as they experienced care, support, and acceptance within their adoptive families. Both PAX C and PAX E shared experiences that reflected belongingness and self-worth. PAX C recounted shared moments as deeply meaningful, marked by safety and family acceptance that fostered belonging and emotional security. Yet these experiences also carried the tension of obligation—feeling expected to reciprocate care—before evolving into genuine gratitude for the acceptance received. Similarly, PAX E emphasized nurturing support, home acceptance, and being treated as a child. While such bonds could initially evoke a sense of duty to conform to family roles, they ultimately nurtured gratitude, enhancing self-worth and affirming adoptive family ties. Both experienced emotions rooted in safety, acceptance, and belonging within their adoptive families, which initially included a sense of obligation to meet expectations. Over time, this tension shifted into genuine gratitude, strengthening self-worth and affirming the emotional bonds formed through consistent care and acceptance.

Adoptive parents form emotional bonds is linked to children's emotional and behavioral challenges, mainly through the parents' ability to show self-kindness and practice mindful parenting (Rato et al., 2024). Parents and significant other support decreased perceived stress, increasing positive affect, and decreasing anxiety and depression. On the other hand, perceived stress did not mediate the relationship between friend support and positive affect, anxiety, and depression (Acoba, 2024). It demonstrates that robust familial bonds and empathetic parenting serve as powerful tools for psychological health in adopted children, effectively shielding against stress by cultivating trust, resilience, and a sense of security.

Interview Question Number 2: How do you describe your feelings towards your adoptive parents?

Table 3. Annotated Exemplar on Adopted Children's Feelings towards Adoptive Parents

Participants	Significant Statement
A	<i>"...the moment I had a family, that's when I accepted everything that being a mother was hard, that raising me was hard"</i>
B	<i>"...It was confusing, but as I grew up, especially now, I saw the sacrifices they made for me"</i>

When asked about how they describe their feeling towards their adoptive parents, adoptees recounted a process of initial confusion or hesitation in accepting adoptive care, which evolved into heartfelt appreciation, both PAX A and PAX B shared experiences that reflected acceptance and gratefulness. PAX A recalled a past experience that was initially difficult and marked by uncertainty. Over time, however, the participant moved from confusion to acceptance, especially after forming a family. Similarly, PAX B described moments of self-doubt and resentment, reflecting the tension of early emotional struggles. Yet these feelings gradually shifted into gratitude, as the sacrifices and love of the adoptive family became clear, reinforcing acceptance shaped through reflection and lived experience. Both initially experienced confusion, self-doubt, and emotional struggle as they tried to make sense of their situations. Over time, reflection, lived experiences, and the presence of family transformed these feelings into acceptance and gratitude.

Gratitude supports personal growth after going through hard times, as it supports individuals in processing experiences, fostering social connections, managing emotions, valuing life, and achieving personal growth (Jiang, 2022). Parents often view gratitude as an innate quality in children that can be further developed through proper guidance, highlighting the need to examine how parental socialization shapes its growth (Hussong et al., 2022). When gratitude and acceptance are cultivated within family relationships, they contribute to positive psychological well-being.

Interview Question Number 3: How do you usually express thankfulness or appreciation to them?

Table 4. Annotated Exemplar on How Adopted Children usually express thankfulness or appreciation to Adoptive Parents

Participants	Significant Statement
C	<i>"...I express my gratitude to them through words and actions"</i>
D	<i>"... I express it by saying thank you nonstop like I never forget to thank them"</i>

The participants asked how they usually expressed thankfulness or appreciation to their adoptive parents, they highlighted the desire to give back love as a way of expressing *Utang na Loob*. Both PAX C and PAX D shared experiences that reflected bonded appreciation and gratitude reciprocity. PAX C showed a strong sense of obligation and appreciation to the adopted parents who offered stability and care. Children showed their dedication to preserving the relationship and guaranteeing their family's future well-being by providing material and financial support. PAX C expressed that even a simple word or small gesture can carry deep meaning and express genuine gratitude. Such acts, though modest, often leave a lasting impact by showing appreciation in a heartfelt and sincere way. This shows that gratitude is not only expressed through words but also through everyday behaviors that help build relationships and create a sense of connection.

Adopted children demonstrate loyalty when parents offer consistent care and maintain openness in family narratives. Research on filial piety and adolescent attitudes, though conducted outside the Philippine context, shows that cultural expectations of filial duty shape reciprocal behaviors such as care and respect, which can also inform cross-cultural perspectives on *utang na loob* (Lin et al., 2022). Many children aspire to support their parents financially and physically in the future, reflecting a form of reciprocity that extends beyond emotional gratitude. Such reciprocal exchanges not only reinforce family unity but also enhance children's sense of security and belonging (Goldberg et al., 2023). Everyday behaviors, such as simple gestures, words, or acts of support, play a crucial role in fostering deep. These actions create a cycle of gratitude and care that strengthens bonds over time.

Corollary Question Number 2: What salient themes emerge from the responses of adopted children?

Based on the responses of the adopted child, the researchers identified four (4) emergent themes from the interview transcripts: (1) *Fulfillment in Social Bonds*, (2) *Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude*, (3) *Reciprocal Devotion*, and (4) *Consistent Expression of Appreciation*.

Theme A: Fulfillment in Social Bonds

The first interview question generated the first theme, Fulfillment in Social Bonds. It refers to emotional rewards from nurturing relationships where individuals feel valued, safe, and integrated. Both PAX B and PAX D described feeling valued through consistent presence and care, suggesting that fulfillment in adoptive families is closely tied to reliable support and acceptance. PAX B reflected on the family's constant guidance and encouragement despite imperfections:

"...but they are always there, supporting me, and teaching me things."

Similarly, PAX D highlighted emotional safety and belonging as central to their sense of fulfillment, emphasizing that family interactions were meaningful and reassuring:

"...our entire time together has been touching and rewarding... they make sure I feel safe and accepted as part of their family."

These answers illustrate that, regardless of whether fulfillment was expressed through guidance or emotional reassurance, both participants shared a common experience of being supported, valued, and integrated within their family relationships. This underscores the importance of consistent care and relational security in shaping adoptees' sense of belonging and well-being.

When children grow up in environments characterized by warmth, stability, and adaptability, they are more likely to develop the confidence and social competence needed to thrive in broader social contexts. The presence of strong familial support not only bolsters academic achievement but also fosters resilience and emotional regulation, which are essential for navigating life's challenges (Roman et al., 2025). Furthermore, adoptees who experience acceptance and worth from their adoptive parents are more likely to have stronger social ties and a greater level of life satisfaction as adults (Melero et al., 2023). This aligns closely with Virgilio Enriquez's Kapwa theory, emphasizing *Utang na Loob* (debt of gratitude) as a key element. *Utang na Loob* transforms the relationship from a legal or contractual arrangement into a culturally resonant bond. Adopted individuals, as seen in the participants' expressions of gratitude and belonging, may internalize this as a heartfelt desire to honor their adoptive parents' love and nurturing by fostering unity and mutual recognition. This reciprocity strengthens social bonds, turning adoption into an opportunity for emotional fulfillment rooted in shared Filipino values of appreciation and moral responsibility, rather than mere obligation.

Theme B: Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude

The second interview question generated the second theme, Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude. The emotional journey of an adopted child often begins with uncertainty and hesitation, characterized by difficulty in accepting others or allowing them into one's life. PAX D described this gradual process of emotional openness, emphasizing that acceptance develops through learning to trust and receive love over time:

"...as time goes by, I gradually learn to love them, I gradually see the love they want to show me."

This statement reflects an internal shift from emotional distance to connection, highlighting the child's personal readiness to embrace relationships. In contrast, PAX E focused on identity development and maturity, linking gratitude to an increased awareness of the adoptive parents' sacrifices and sustained care:

"...as I feel their endless care for me, through time, my feelings of gratitude for them deepen, endless gratitude."

PAX E's answer emphasizes reflection and personal growth as central to deepening appreciation.

Despite these differences, both participants described a shared emotional trajectory shaped by time and lived experience. Their narratives illustrate a gradual movement from initial uncertainty toward acceptance and, ultimately, deep gratitude rooted in recognition of love and care. While the pathways differ—emotional openness for PAX D and reflective appreciation for PAX E—the outcome of heartfelt gratitude toward adoptive parents remains consistent, highlighting the role of relational experiences in shaping emotional development.

Studies showed the value of looking at how gratitude and resilience influence each other (Llenares et al., 2020). Gratitude can be seen in two ways: benevolence, which reflects the emotional side of being thankful, and reciprocity, which is the act of returning or paying forward a favor (Navarro & Tudge, 2020). This connects with Virgilio Enriquez's *Kapwa* theory, where *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) is central. For adopted children, this often begins with uncertainty but grows into recognition of their adoptive parents' love, acceptance, and sacrifices, leading to a strong desire to honor the relationship. Over time, *utang na loob* develops into loyalty and respect, giving emotional fulfillment.

Theme C: Reciprocal Devotion

The third interview question generated the third theme, Reciprocal Devotion, which refers to the participants' expression of gratitude and affection toward their adoptive parents through actions and verbal appreciation. This theme illustrates how gratitude becomes a habitual practice that strengthens family bonds. PAX D emphasized verbal appreciation as a constant, intentional habit, highlighting the importance of regularly acknowledging the care received:

"... I express it by saying thank you nonstop, I never forget to thank them."

This response shows that for PAX D, gratitude is primarily expressed through words, serving as a daily reminder of recognition and respect toward adoptive parents. In contrast, PAX E described gratitude as both verbal and actionable, combining sincere words with concrete gestures of appreciation:

"... I express my appreciation through actions and words. every day I make sure to say, 'thank you' sincerely."

PAX E's answer reflects a more holistic approach, where gratitude is not only communicated verbally but also demonstrated through behaviors that reinforce care and support. Together, these accounts illustrate that consistent and intentional expressions of gratitude—whether verbal, actionable, or both, strengthen emotional bonds, reinforce connection and trust, and transform gratitude into a lived practice that deepens intimacy and contributes to the stability of adoptive family relationships over time.

Adoption gives children stability and support, but it also brings challenges that need careful care, while also giving them a chance to give back love and strengthen the relationship with parents (Berman et al., 2025). Adoptive parents' attitudes shape how children feel and grow, and good communication helps build strong bonds where children can also give back love and support to their parents (Wright et al., 2024). This theme aligns with Virgilio Enriquez's *Kapwa* theory, emphasizing *Utang na Loob* (debt of gratitude) as a key element. In adoption, Reciprocal Devotion embodies *Utang na Loob* by transforming gratitude into active expressions of devotion, such as verbal thanks and supportive actions, which honor the parents' nurturing and sacrifices. Adopted children internalize a desire to repay care through respect and service, evolving the relationship into a culturally meaningful bond rooted in shared moral responsibility.

Theme D: Consistent Expression of Appreciation

The fourth interview question created the theme Consistent Expression of Appreciation. When asked, PAX B shared that appreciation must be visible through behaviors. Rather than relying solely on verbal expressions, participants emphasized showing appreciation through respectful communication and consistent actions. PAX B and PAX E emphasized demonstrating gratitude through actions rather than words alone. PAX B highlighted the importance of making appreciation visible through behavior, reflecting a belief that love and thankfulness gain meaning when actively expressed:

“... don’t just talk, show your love and thankfulness for your parents with actions.”

In contrast, PAX E focused on ongoing positive behaviors, including respect, communication, and kindness, emphasizing that nurturing family unity requires continual effort:

“... through consistent displays of respect, open communication, and acts of kindness.”

Both participants share the view that genuine appreciation is expressed through consistent, tangible actions that reinforce family bonds and foster emotional connection. Their responses show that gratitude is experienced as a lived practice, where ongoing behavior, rather than verbal acknowledgment alone, strengthens relationships and demonstrates care within the adoptive family.

Adoptive parents are recognized as having a vital influence in building resilience, supporting identity formation, and promoting healthy adjustment, all of which contribute to children developing stronger feelings of gratitude and loyalty (Rusthon, 2021). Beyond emotional appreciation, gratitude among adopted children is also associated with long-term developmental benefits. Studies show that gratitude functions as a protective factor, enhancing psychological well-being and promoting resilience in the face of challenges (Scott et al., 2021). This directly connects to *Kapwa* theory, as articulated by Virgilio Enriquez, which emphasizes *Utang na Loob* (debt of gratitude) as a key element. This sense of *Utang na Loob* may emerge as a profound recognition of the adoptive parents’ love, acceptance, and nurturing. Rather than feeling obligated, the child may internalize a desire to honor the relationship through loyalty, respect, and acts of service, reflecting the *Kapwa* ideal of mutual recognition and unity. In this context, consistent expressions of appreciation embody *Utang na Loob* by fostering reciprocal devotion, where ongoing kindness and respect build emotional harmony and lifelong unity in adoptive families.

Most research focuses on adoption processes, laws, or the views of adoptive parents, which means the voices of adopted children are often missing. Because of this, people have a limited understanding of the emotional, social, and cultural challenges they face, as well as how they build resilience. The few studies that do exist highlight important themes such as identity, belonging, attachment, and gratefulness. These themes are valuable because they show the complex realities of adopted children’s lives and help guide researchers, practitioners, and policymakers in providing better support.

CONCLUSIONS

Adopted children understand and express *Utang na Loob* through four interconnected themes: Fulfillment in Social Bonds, Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude, Reciprocal Devotion, and Consistent Expression of Appreciation. Together, these themes show that gratitude is a dynamic relational ethic rather than a fixed obligation. Fulfillment in Social Bonds highlights how adopted children experience gratitude as rooted in emotional fulfillment from strong social

connections, such as a sense of belonging and security within their adoptive families. This transforms abstract obligations into lived relational bonds. Gradual Acceptance to Deep Gratitude shows how adoptees move from initially accepting care to recognizing their parents' sacrifices, evolving gratitude from passive acknowledgment to heartfelt appreciation. Reciprocal Devotion illustrates how gratitude is expressed as a two-way ethic. Adoptees demonstrate loyalty, affection, and mutual care, interpreting *Utang na Loob* as a balanced exchange that strengthens enduring kinship ties. Consistent Expression of Appreciation demonstrates how adopted children maintain gratitude through ongoing words and actions, such as verbal affirmations and acts of service, reflecting a sustained cultural ethic that reinforces family bonds.

These findings extend Kapwa Theory by showing that *Utang na Loob* operates in non-biological kinship structures, rooted in adoptees' lived emotional experiences. Gratitude transforms legal or formal bonds into culturally meaningful kinship through care, reciprocity, and mutual emotional investment. This challenges the idea that Kapwa, shared identity and relational interconnectedness is limited to biological ties, showing that affective connections can be prioritized over genetic lineage.

Overall, the study refines Filipino cultural psychology by positioning *Utang na Loob* as a flexible, context-dependent relational ethic enacted through sustained emotional engagement and everyday devotion. The findings highlight how kinship is actively constructed through recognition, reciprocity, and emotional understanding rather than biology. Participants' narratives reveal how gratitude emerges authentically from relational bonds over time, offering a nuanced model of how Filipino cultural norms shape family dynamics. This study contributes to Filipino cultural psychology and global kinship research by showing the transformative power of emotional kinship, demonstrating that values like Kapwa and *Utang na Loob* guide meaningful relationships in adoptive families beyond biological ties.

LIMITATION & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study on the sense of "Utang Na Loob" (a Filipino cultural concept of deep gratitude and reciprocal obligation) toward adoptive parents among adopted children is constrained by its small sample of five female participants, all from Batangas, Philippines. The use of snowball sampling, which relied on referrals from initial participants to recruit others with relevant experiences of debt of gratitude in adoptive families, ensured access to those with direct insights but limited the diversity and scope of the data. Consequently, the findings may not capture the full spectrum of how "Utang Na Loob" manifests in adoptive child dynamics across different cultural contexts or socioeconomic backgrounds, where familial structures and social norms could influence expressions of gratitude and obligation. Moreover, the results are not generalizable to other adopted children outside this specific group, whose experiences of indebtedness and familial bonds might vary significantly.

To address these limitations and deepen the understanding of "Utang Na Loob" in adoptive contexts, future research should incorporate a larger, more diverse sample, including participants from various genders, such as adding male participants for broader perspectives on how debt of gratitude dynamics might differ by gender, ages, and locations beyond Batangas and employ quantitative methods alongside qualitative approaches. This would enable statistical analysis of prevalence, patterns, and psychological impacts, facilitating broader comparisons and more robust insights into how adopted children navigate feelings of gratitude toward their adoptive parents.

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