



Phenomenological Research on the Agricultural Experiences of Youth in the Philippines

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Abstract: The lack of agricultural involvement of the youth is a worldwide issue that endangers food security and sustainable development. As the youth continue to pursue non-agricultural courses and migrate to non-agricultural careers, there is a need to increase the labor force in the agricultural industry. As such, this phenomenological research aimed to understand the experiences of youths enrolled in agricultural courses. It aims to provide insights into the meanings of agriculture from individuals who have chosen to pursue agricultural education despite society's pessimism about agriculture. Data was collected and analyzed using Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method. We individually interviewed eleven senior high school students enrolled in an agricultural program at a Philippine state university. We also conducted member checking to enhance data validity and reliability. The participants have practical experience in agriculture, which focuses on crop production and livestock management. They also had communicative experiences, which are their interactions at school, with families, friends, and media focusing on agriculture. Moreover, for the participants, agriculture is a worthwhile endeavor. Agriculture can be a source of fulfillment, a stressful and risky field of specialization, and a means of contributing to national development. This research highlights that when given opportunities for agricultural engagement, the youths' experiences can establish positive meanings on agriculture. Thus, researchers can pursue further research on agricultural involvement. Moreover, there must be collaboration among relevant agencies to intensify efforts in encouraging the youth's participation in agricultural activities.

Keywords: Youths; Agriculture; Qualitative; Communication- development.

1. Introduction

The decreased involvement of youth in agriculture has been a global issue, as it puts the sustainability of the agricultural industry and food security at risk. The lack of appeal of agriculture among the youth poses a challenge to agriculture-based sectors, mainly from developing countries (Fernández, 2014). Farmers' aging and generational succession are a concern in many countries, including the Philippines. The country's lagging agriculture sector, high outmigration, and rising education of the youths contribute to their retreat from agriculture. Young Filipinos' participation in international migration is problematic due to their concentration on less-skilled and less secure jobs and the mismatch between their education and work. In this case, the youths want to avoid engaging in agricultural careers (Asis, 2019). As young people migrate to non-agricultural professions and occupations, human resources in the agricultural industry steadily shrink, leaving the country on the verge of losing its food security (Fernández, 2014).

Youth in the Global South have negative views of agriculture due to low involvement and perceived limited economic benefits (Geza et al., 2021). Moreover, in general, the youth's observations on farm stress which refers to the distress caused by arrears, weather changes, livestock, and crop issues, contribute to their pessimism about agriculture (Norrell-Aitch & Stewart, 2019). The youth's waning interest in agriculture among youth is also evident in the decline in enrollment in agricultural programs. In the Philippines, there is a declining trend in enrollment in agricultural programs across the country. Hence, the government must prioritize making the agricultural sector appealing and easy to sell to the youth to ensure inclusive growth and food security (Senate of the Philippines, 2019).

It is essential to study the engagement of young people in agriculture to determine if the intent to make agriculture appealing to them has translated into the desired outcome (Geza et al., 2021; Haruna et al., 2019). Hence, the authors being faculty-researchers at Pampanga State Agricultural University (one of the universities in the Philippines offering various agriculture and agriculture-related curricular programs), intended to explore the agriculture students' involvement in agriculture using a phenomenological research approach. The researchers selected agriculture students to document their experiences and meanings of agriculture as they undergo a program viewed negatively in society. Therefore, students at this agricultural university would have experiences and opinions about agricultural engagement.

In this sense, the philosophy of phenomenology serves as a theoretical framework for researchers in their pursuit of comprehending phenomena on the level of subjective reality. This qualitative research approach involves interviews, observations, and discussions to understand better participants' views and perspectives (Qutoshi, 2018). Phenomenology is a philosophy, methodology, or approach to study or research that focuses on people's perceptions and how they make sense of things (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). It is the study of a phenomenon - how an individual experiences things and how things appear during the experience. Thus, it concerns the meaning of things based on experience (Smith, 2018).

Previous researchers (Lemmons, 2014; Stone, 2019) on agriculture have also employed phenomenological approaches to understand the lived experiences of people's engagement in agriculture, such as farmers and teachers. As such, the purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of young people in agriculture and the meanings of those experiences. This is to understand their views and perspectives on agriculture to create effective strategies or initiatives to promote agricultural programs and elevate youth's participation in agriculture. Therefore, to understand the experiences of youth enrolled in agricultural courses, the study answered the following questions: 1) What are the experiences of the youth in agriculture? and 2) What are the meanings of agriculture for the youth?

2. Method

We used the phenomenological research approach in this study. Phenomenology is a social science research area that explores the lived experience of humans. Commonly used tools include interviews, discussions, and observations. The researchers' expertise is crucial in gaining insight into participants' personal knowledge (Qutoshi, 2018). Furthermore, phenomenology examines a particular group of people's lived experiences to document and describe their realities and perceptions within a specific context (Gary et al., 2020). It allowed the researchers to investigate the essence of the experiences to understand agriculture from the participants' perspectives.

In this research, we used descriptive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology aims to explicate the fundamental characteristics of a phenomenon under examination, precisely its distinct essence or essential structure, which distinguishes it from other phenomena (Morrow et al., 2015). In this case, the phenomenon under study is the agricultural experiences of the youth enrolled in agricultural courses.

We conducted the study at Pampanga State Agricultural University (PSAU) among eleven senior high school students in October 2019. PSAU offers distinctive agriculture programs, including tailored curricula, research on community needs, technology transfer, and quality testing and marketing (PSAU, 2023). In selecting participants, we used the purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling involves the researcher selecting a valid sample based on their expertise. It is used in qualitative research to gain detailed knowledge about a specific phenomenon or when the population is small. A purposeful sample requires defined criteria and reasoning for inclusion (McCombes, 2019). In this case, participants met the following selection criteria: 1) they must be enrolled in the Agricultural-Fisheries Strand at PSAU; and 2) they must have experience in agriculture. The lived experiences, in this case, are not limited to direct agricultural involvement but may also be the essence of participation with people in agriculture and agricultural settings.

The students enrolled in the Agricultural-Fisheries Strand were selected as participants as they have agricultural experience because of their academic courses. The participants were ages 17-18 years old. Specifically, there were four males and seven females. The theoretical saturation served as the criterion for determining the number of participants. Saturation is the point at which the researcher no longer discovers any new data, thus limiting the ability to develop categorical properties further (Saunders et al., 2017). As the researchers observed recurring instances, their empirical confidence grew, indicating saturation of a particular category.

In the interviews, we employed voluntary participation and considered participants' willingness. To maintain anonymity, we did not collect personally identifiable data, such as the participants' names. We prepared an informed consent form. We asked the participants to read and approve the consent form before participating in the interview. The document contained information regarding the study's title, researcher's information, background and procedure of the interview, discussing that it would be voice recorded, eligibility criteria to participate, the time required, risks, and benefits. It also included a confidentiality clause to ensure that responses to the interview would be anonymous and that there would be voluntary participation. We also informed the participants that their participation would be voluntary, meaning they could participate without pressure and coercion. They could withdraw from, or leave, the study at any point without feeling obliged to continue.

We used an interview guide to conduct the individual interviews. The research objectives served as a guide for elaborating the interview guide questions. The instrument consisted of exploratory questions determining the participants' experiences in agriculture, such as their previous involvement in agricultural endeavors and the meanings of agriculture from their perspective. The average duration of the individual interviews was 20 to 30 minutes. Simultaneous to the interview was the member checking among the participants. Member checking is a means for the researchers to ascertain the validity and credibility of the data collected. We conducted this by seeking verification from the participants on the portrayals of the researchers in their narratives and responses (Candela, 2019).

In data analysis, we adopted Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. This method includes a seven-step process to rigorously analyze data and results in a validated description of the phenomenon under study. This process relies on personal accounts obtained through various means, such as interviews, written narratives, and online communication (Morrow et al., 2015). We conducted the following steps, which represent Colaizzi's process for phenomenological data analysis in this study:

1. After data collection, we transcribed the interview recordings. Since the recordings are in the Kapampangan and Filipino languages, we had to translate the transcripts into English for proper data analysis. Thus, the voice recordings and transcripts served as the basis for the data analysis. We read the transcripts from the interview thoroughly;
2. We extracted the statements relevant to the phenomena under study from the transcripts. We coded statements and phrases related to agriculture experiences using tables to separate the codes. After comparing extracted statements, we reached a consensus.

3. We formulated the meanings based on the significant statements. We also coded underlying meanings in one category for an exhaustive description and compared formulated and original meanings for consistency;
4. We categorized meanings into clusters of themes and themes. Initially, some constructs emerged. For this identification of constructs, we collated the common expressions or responses that the participants spoke. In this research, these were the participants' responses about how their lived experiences have shaped their view of the meaning of agriculture;
5. We integrated the findings into exhaustive descriptions of their lived experiences and the meaning of such experiences;
6. We created descriptions of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. In this step, we removed the redundant or overestimated descriptions to emphasize the basic structure. We also made amendments for more precise cluster-theme relationships and to remove ambiguous structures.
7. We validated the findings through member checking and peer debriefing to ensure reliability.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Practical and Communicative Experiences of the Youth

We first categorized the experiences of the youth in agriculture into their practical and communicative experiences, which we presented in this part.

3.1.1 The Practical Agricultural Experiences of the Youth

The practical experiences of the youth pertain to their actual exposure to performative agricultural practices. In this sense, the participants' experiences in agricultural-based activities are on crop production and livestock management. They also shared that they have experiences in crop production in terms of planting, propagation, fertilization, and harvesting, as well as livestock management in their interactions with farm animals.

The participants noted farming as one of the agricultural activities in which they engaged. They had experience planting in and out of the school premises. This was evident in the statement of Participant 1: "I tried planting mustard in our backyard." The participants also experienced propagation techniques in planting, as mentioned by Participant 10: "(I tried) cuttings and learned how to reproduce plants on cuttings successfully." Focusing on nutrient management in crop production, participants narrated during the interview that one agricultural-based activity they experienced was applying fertilizer. As Participant 10 described, "I had to touch chicken feces to apply fertilizer to the plant bed."

The participants have experienced the process of agricultural production of crops. It is a remarkable result as it indicates that they were also introduced to propagation and had a chance to participate in performing the procedures to produce a new plant from an existing one. This result reaffirms the study's finding conducted in the Banka district of Bihar, India, which states that propagation techniques are widely adopted among rural youth (Kushwa et al., 2018). In this sense, young people are interested in planting and cultivating. Thus, they also see farming as a better prospect for them. The main concern is whether the youth are interested enough to stay in the agricultural sector, and that is why it is necessary to sustain and increase their interest in engaging in agriculture (Leavy & Hossain, 2014).

The participants also experienced harvesting as part of the crop production process. Participant 2 narrated, "(I have experienced) manual harvesting. That is bad. There is a possibility that you will suffer a heat stroke." In relevance to this, Participant 9 stated, "I have experienced picking tomatoes and mangoes for a day." It specifies that they involved themselves not only in crop cultivation and breeding activities but also in procedures that involved harvesting crops and moving them to a safer location for processing, consumption, or storage. The young people's involvement in farming, like performing agricultural activities such as harvesting, is said to be motivated by profit (Rodriguez, 2017). As such, the youth are more likely to conduct agricultural practices if financial gain exists.

Regarding livestock management, participants had experienced human-farm-animal interaction, specifically the carabao. In this case, the carabao is the Philippine national animal often used in farming. To this, Participant 9 narrated, "It was (good experience in farming) that I had the experience of riding a carabao." In the Philippines, carabao has cultural and economic significance. For a Filipino farmer, the carabao is his pack animal. This draft animal helps to plow and cultivate wet rice fields. In addition, farmers use carabao to transport agricultural products to the market. As such, it is typical for Filipinos to be exposed to farm animals like this (Dela Cruz, 2016).

Agricultural education is a critical element in motivating youth's involvement in agriculture. The higher the education, the more excellent the opportunity for the youth workforce to immerse themselves in agriculture (Susilowati, 2014).

3.1.2 The Communicative Agricultural Experiences of the Youth

The second part of the discussion is on the youth's experiences in terms of their interactions that were part of their experiences in agriculture. In this sense, the youth's agricultural interactions that exposed/immersed them in agriculture are as follows: school, family, farmers, media, and their peers.

3.1.2.1 Agricultural Interactions at School

School as a learning environment has allowed participants to learn agricultural education. In this case, teachers have played a crucial role in being sources of agricultural information for the participants. Thus, the data transmitted by the teachers range from the technical definition of agriculture, including its scope, to the management and production of crops, poultry, pigs, and cattle. In the statement of Participant 3, the knowledge of agriculture dealing with crops and plants was established through interaction with teachers, "The teacher (taught me that agriculture is) producing new crops and plants. (Agriculture is) growing new crops."

In addition, the participants' interaction at school, particularly with their teachers, also established an experience that enabled them to view agriculture as an essential enterprise. In this case, the teachers played a vital role in making the participants aware of the importance of agriculture as an industry that contributes to food security and economic development. The interaction with the teachers presented agriculture as a business that contributes to economic growth, as narrated by Participants 5 and 8. Participant 5 stated, "The teachers showed me that agriculture is part of our economy. Without farming/agriculture, we will not be progressive because if we depend more on imports, we will not develop."

From these results, we deduced that the experience of interacting with teachers and the school environment has been instrumental in developing an understanding of agriculture as an essential enterprise. In this case, Holz -Clause and Jost's concept reaffirmed that agricultural literacy enabled by schools is a critical necessity. It is because it can lead to an awakening of agricultural interest among the youths and ultimately to an agriculturally conscious society that can practice the agricultural involvement that enables society's survival (Luckey, 2013).

3.1.2.2 Agricultural Interactions with Family

The information learned by the participants from their families ranges from farming as a process of agricultural production to farming as a family business. Discussing specifically, Participant 2 mentioned how his family viewed farming and planting as two related concepts: "Family farming (showed me that) is not just tilling. Farming is planting crops. Farming is harvesting crops." In addition, Participant 7 reflected on farming as a commercial enterprise that is also communicated to them as presented in this statement: "Family (influenced me to practice farming). Farming is business."

These lines show how the family members became educators of agriculture as an industry and source of livelihood for the youth. As such, the youth's experiences can be essential in laying the groundwork for their beliefs on farming as a future profession and career.

This finding reaffirms that families communicating the concepts and meaning of farming can influence youth's perceptions and practices about agriculture (Rodriguez, 2017).

3.1.2.3 Agricultural Interaction with Farmers

Participant 9's interaction with a farmer, albeit indirect, served as an agricultural experience, as it became an observation of farming in the countryside. As narrated by Participant 9, "I visited a farm near our house. It was heartbreaking to watch the sweat of the farmers flowing completely amidst the mud below and the outrageous sunlight above." Notably, this statement shows that the farmer working in the field became a reality check for the participant of what it means to work in agriculture. As such, farmers are a direct source of information and agricultural experience. In this case, farming required tenacity, patience, and hard work.

3.1.2.4 Agricultural Interaction in the Media

Television has been a typical means of making agricultural information available to the participants. In this sense, agricultural information varies in the importance of the agricultural industry and the challenges it currently faces. The media also shows agriculture as a high-value but underrated industry. This observation is noted by Participant 11 in her statement below: "Television (showed me that) agriculture is not being prioritized because they want our country to be richer with the products sponsored by others." These statements show how the news can provide information about the agricultural industry's problems. In this case, the media is establishing the realities of agriculture in the sense that it needs government and youth involvement. As such, it is clear that the use of mass media in programs aimed at agricultural development can successfully inform and mobilize people (Khan et al., 2020).

3.2 Agriculture as a Worthwhile Endeavor

The second part highlighted the participants' attributed meanings on agriculture. Here, there are three sub-themes discussed extensively to provide contextual definitions of agriculture as a worthwhile endeavor.

3.2.1 Agriculture as a Source of Self-Realization

Participants may find self-fulfillment in engaging in agriculture, seeing it as a rewarding experience. In this sense, the rewards they earned from their efforts in agriculture served as a basis for their satisfaction. The statement that corresponds to this concept is: "I have tried my hand at growing mustard in our backyard. I was amazed when they grew, and we used them as our 'ulam.' The feeling was gratifying. (Participant 1)." It indicates that optimism in agriculture is associated with success in nourishing and producing with agricultural production. Notably, a good experience is in successful agricultural production practices.

The participants may also see agriculture as a source of financial and family success and as a source of information, knowledge, and skills. Engaging in agriculture is a rewarding experience that transcends the participants and their families. The following statement presents the concept: "Farming is hard work, but it is quick money (Participant 6)." From these narratives, one can see how farming is a rewarding experience that can lead to being seen as a source of self-fulfillment. It reiterates that to engage in agriculture, and one must have a positive attitude toward farming (Gangwar & Kameswari, 2016).

3.2.2 Agriculture as a Stressful and Dangerous Field of Expertise

Agriculture is recognized as a stress-inducing field because success cannot always be guaranteed. For the participants, not always knowing whether an agricultural production process will be successful makes the agricultural experience harmful. This idea is presented in the following line: "(I have done) marcotting, (it was a bad experience) because some of them died which affected our grade (Participant 4)."

In this case, since the participants in this research are students and have had agricultural experiences directly relevant to their academic grades, farming became a source of stress. Meanwhile, agricultural engagement as a health concern emerged in the participants' narratives. Having experienced farming activities up close and seeing farm workers established health-related concerns in the practice of farming, as seen in the following lines: "(I have experienced) manual harvesting. That is bad. There is a possibility that you suffer from heatstroke (Participant 2)."

The participants are concerned about the health risks of farming activities because of their awareness of the natural conditions in performing certain farming activities, such as heat and direct exposure to the sun. There is concern about having heat strokes as a possible outcome. In this sense, health-related issues are considered stressors in agricultural engagement. Thus, these concepts tend to attest that the youth assume that being in agriculture is a tiring and challenging life that may not be worth it (Kloekner, 2022).

3.2.3 Agriculture as a Means to Support the Country's Development

In the participants' narratives about their agricultural experiences, agriculture is an industry that needs youth and government support. In this case, the government and youth must strive to sustain agribusiness for the country to progress. It is presented in the quote below: "(Agriculture is a) big and rampant problem in the country (Participant 6)." The government's lack of prioritization of the agricultural sector has repercussions in convincing young people to engage in agriculture. Meanwhile, discussing agriculture as an industry that needs youths' support, Participant 4 narrated this concept below: "For now, agriculture needs us to improve. Social media is the medium to connect us in agriculture (Participant 1)."

It is a positive and notable finding, as it presents the notion that young people know their involvement in agriculture is necessary for the industry's progress. It affirms that the government must primarily engage the youth for a country's agricultural transformation (Bello et al., 2015). Moreover, participants may take it as a college course by seeing agriculture as a high-demand industry and offering career prospects. However, there are other reasons they would like to get involved in agriculture at a higher level. Having career ties in agriculture is also attributed to lifetime employment, entrepreneurship, and a good source of financial resources. As Participant 10 stated, "Teacher (influenced me towards agriculture). He said agriculture provides lifetime employment."

Participants perceived that agricultural careers and businesses provide financial gains that can lead to wealth and a comfortable lifestyle. There is a notion among young people that farming can be a wealth multiplier and a form of social security in terms of employment (Manalo & van De Fliert, 2013). By viewing agriculture as a career prospect, personal career growth and development can contribute to the country's development.

Ultimately, participants can see agriculture as a means of economic development. In this case, agriculture becomes a key player in national development. It is optimistic that participants can recognize agriculture as an essential economic enterprise. "(Agriculture) is part of our economy. Without farming/agriculture, we will not be progressive because if we depend more on imports, we will not develop (Participant 5)". Looking at the participants' perspective, agriculture has become a crucial and strategic industry that can provide food security and economic growth. This finding asserts that agriculture as a source of livelihood is critical to most people's survival, especially peasants (Naamwintome & Bagson, 2013). Thus, it becomes a means for the development of the country.

4. Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendation

Although there is decreasing number of youth involved in agriculture, this research shows that with the right contextual factors, youth involvement in agriculture is feasible and possible. Allowing and providing opportunities for young people to experience agriculture establishes personal meanings of agriculture that serve as a basis for their actions. In this case, the participants' experiences were practical and communicative. Their practical experiences are in agricultural production and livestock management. These communicative experiences are the interactions of school participants, families, farmers, media, and friends related to agriculture.

In addition, farming has various meanings that their experiences have shaped. Farming is a source of fulfillment, a rewarding experience, and a means for preserving the environment. The participants described it as a stressful and dangerous field of expertise. Still, agriculture is seen as a means to help develop the country. In this sense, it is an industry that needs support from youth and the government, a prospective career, and a tool for economic development. Ultimately, the participants' experiences in agriculture allow them to have individual understandings of what agriculture is. In this sense, their constructed meanings of agriculture have also served as the basis for their actions toward agriculture. Concerned agencies should provide sufficient support for various agricultural programs that aim to promote and engage young people in agriculture.

As this research focused on a single phenomenon, the PSAU students' experiences in agriculture, it is recommended that future research consider studying agricultural involvement in a cultural context using ethnography. This is to understand better young people's shared culture and social dynamics relevant to their agricultural experiences. The authors also recommend that the government intensify its programs to engage youth in agriculture. Maximizing the use of social media to contribute to agricultural modernization and transformation can be done. The researchers also forward that schools and local communities must serve as agricultural learning centers that can provide agricultural information and attend agricultural activities to serve as hands-on experiences. In addition, development communication and media professionals are encouraged to intensify information and social mobilization campaigns to promote youth's involvement in government agricultural programs.

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
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