

Late, Not Lazy: A Qualitative Exploration of Tardiness and Workplace Accountability among Employees in a State University

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Abstract. Habitual tardiness among government employees remains a persistent challenge despite existing policies such as the Revised Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service (RRACCS). While most studies focus on sanctions and quantitative trends, little is known about how sanctioned employees perceive and experience habitual lateness, particularly in Philippine state universities. This study used a descriptive phenomenological design guided by Giorgi's method to explore the lived experiences of ten permanent employees who had been formally sanctioned for tardiness within the past 6-12 months. In-depth interviews were analyzed into meaning units, psychological insights, and essential themes. Four themes emerged: (1) balancing family demands and professional obligations; (2) systemic and environmental factors influencing tardiness; (3) punctuality does not reflect work performance; and (4) emotional impact and personal reflections on tardiness. Findings revealed that caregiving responsibilities, commuting challenges, and inconsistent policy enforcement shape tardiness. Employees often felt guilt and frustration, but also showed motivation for improvement after sanctions. The study concludes that habitual tardiness is not merely disciplinary but a multifaceted issue requiring human-centered interventions. The proposed TIME CARE framework-Tardiness Intervention through Management, Empathy, and Consistent Accountability with Responsive Engagement - offers a holistic approach. This study contributes to policy reform, wellnessdriven accountability, and strategies that balance empathy, structure, and performance.

Keywords: Employee discipline and support; Government employees; Habitual tardiness; Phenomenological research; Revised rules on administrative cases in the civil service (RRACCS)

1.0 Introduction

Tardiness is a universal workplace issue that manifests across cultures, generations, and industries. Globally, about 20–25% of employees are late at least once a month, with 6% of hourly workers regularly arriving late (Zippia, 2024). Common reasons include traffic congestion (25%), personal problems (18%), oversleeping (15%), and childcare responsibilities (12%) (WorkYard Survey, as cited in Business News Daily, 2024). Generational perspectives also influence punctuality: in the UK, 47% of Gen Z workers consider being 5–10 minutes late acceptable, compared to only 22% of baby boomers, reflecting a cultural shift in how punctuality is valued (The Guardian, 2024).

In government institutions, punctuality is more than a matter of personal responsibility — it is tied to performance and accountability (Han, 2019). In the Philippines, the Revised Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service

(RRACCS), under CSC Resolution No. 1701077 (2017), defines habitual tardiness as being late ten times in a month for at least two months in a semester, or for two consecutive months in a year, regardless of the minutes late. Classified as a less grave offense, it carries progressive penalties ranging from reprimand to dismissal (Civil Service Commission, 2017). Despite this framework, habitual tardiness persists, with many offices reporting weak enforcement due to incomplete documentation, delayed administrative action, or the reluctance of HR officers to escalate cases (Williams et al., 2020).

Recent data illustrate the scope of the issue. In 2023, about 18% of government employees in major urban agencies incurred at least one tardiness incident monthly, with 4–6% reaching the threshold for habitual tardiness (CSC, 2024). A 2022 Commission on Audit (COA) report also noted inconsistent documentation and enforcement across agencies, potentially undermining the intent of RRACCS (COA, 2022). Scholars further highlight that, beyond policies, structural and personal factors—including caregiving roles, commuting difficulties, work-life stress, and mental health—affect punctuality (Casper et al., 2024). Also, in a recent study at a state university in Samar, Refuncion and Valles (2025) found that employees' domestic responsibilities—such as health issues, caregiving, and financial strain—as well as institutional conditions like rigid policies, limited career growth opportunities, and poor employee engagement, significantly contributed to both absenteeism and tardiness.

Much of the existing literature, however, remains quantitative, focusing on statistical trends, attendance rates, or compliance (Kulal & Dinesh, 2025). Such approaches overlook the subjective realities and contextual factors shaping lateness, particularly within the Philippine public sector. While some studies address organizational shortcomings (Warne et al., 2020), personal routines such as late bedtimes (Mercara, 2020), or even predictive tools like Naïve Bayes algorithms for lateness determinants (Mercara, 2020), there remains limited qualitative research exploring employees' lived experiences with tardiness sanctions. Moreover, no study has specifically examined the narratives of government employees sanctioned under RRACCS in recent years, despite shifting work-life boundaries in the post-pandemic era (Kasperska et al., 2024).

This study seeks to fill that gap. It aims to explore the lived experiences, perceptions, and contributing factors behind habitual tardiness among government employees sanctioned under RRACCS. Specifically, it examines (1) the personal, organizational, and environmental factors contributing to habitual tardiness; (2) employees' perceptions and experiences of RRACCS sanctions; (3) coping mechanisms and behavioral responses following disciplinary action; and (4) potential interventions or support systems to reduce tardiness and promote punctuality. By situating tardiness within both disciplinary and human-centered frameworks, this research contributes to institutional policy reform and more empathetic organizational strategies.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of government employees sanctioned under the Revised Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service (RRACCS) for habitual tardiness. This approach provided insight into how employees made sense of policy enforcement, personal struggles, and institutional responses. Specifically, Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method (2009) guided the analysis, as it offers a structured yet flexible process for uncovering essential psychological meanings in lived experiences. Giorgi's method was applied as published, with no major adaptations, ensuring rigor and empathy in interpreting narratives.

2.2 Participants and Sampling Technique

Ten participants were purposefully selected for their relevance to the study objectives. Inclusion criteria required that participants be permanent (plantilla) employees of a state university, have received at least one formal sanction or notice under RRACCS for habitual tardiness within the last 6–12 months, and have served in their current post for at least six months. This ensured recent and meaningful exposure to the phenomenon under investigation. Diversity in age, gender, family background, commuting experience, and department was sought to capture a range of perspectives. The sample size followed Giorgi's (2009) guidance for in-depth phenomenological work and aligned with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation of 5–25 participants.

2.3 Data Collection

Data were gathered from April to May 2025 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews guided by open-ended questions that encouraged participants to reflect on their work schedules, tardiness incidents, responses to

sanctions, and coping strategies. The interview guide was validated by a qualitative research expert for clarity, alignment with objectives, and ethical appropriateness instead of pilot testing. Depending on availability, interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via Google Meet and lasted 45–60 minutes. With participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

2.4 Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological method (2009). First, each transcript was read holistically, followed by identification of meaning units—shifts in significance related to habitual tardiness and sanctions. These units were transformed into psychologically sensitive expressions and then synthesized into structures representing the essential features of the experience. From these structures, a general description of the phenomenon was articulated across cases. To ensure rigor, the researcher engaged in bracketing (epoché) and maintained a reflexive journal throughout. A Fishbone Diagram (Ishikawa) was also used for visual presentation and intervention mapping of findings, but not as an analytic tool.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly observed ethical protocols. Informed consent was obtained prior to participation, clarifying the study's purpose, procedures, and the right to withdraw without consequence. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms, and all recordings and transcripts were securely stored with limited access. Recordings were deleted after transcription and validation. Participants were also invited to review their transcripts for accuracy, enhancing transparency and credibility.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The study (Table 1) included ten participants, evenly divided between administrative and academic employees (50% each). In terms of service length, most were mid-career, with 40% having 8–15 years and 30% with 5–10 years of experience, while fewer had 1–4 years (20%) or 16 years and above (10%). Half of the employees reported working three overtime hours daily, and another 40% worked two hours, with 50% doing overtime every day—indicating heavy workloads. For transportation, 60% used motorcycles, while tricycles and pedicabs were each used by 20%. Travel time was relatively short, as 50% spent 10 minutes, 30% took 5 minutes, and only 20% traveled 20 minutes to work, suggesting that distance was not a significant factor in tardiness.

Table 1. Demographic and Work-Related Particulars of Participants

Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
Employment Category		
Administrative Employee	5	50.0
Academic Employee	5	50.0
Length of Government		
Service		
1-4 years	2	20.0
5-10 years	3	30.0
8-15 years	4	40.0
16 years and above	1	10.0
Overtime Hours Per Day		
1 hour	1	10.0
2 hours	4	40.0
3 hours	5	50.0
Frequency of Overtime		
Twice a week	2	20.0
Trice a week	3	30.0
Every Day	5	50.0
Mode of Transportation		
Tricycle	2	20.0
Motorcycle	6	60.0
Pedicab	2	20.0
Time Travel at Work		
5 minutes	3	30.0
10 minutes	5	50.0
20 minutes	2	20.0

3.1 Personal, Organizational, and Environmental Contributors to Habitual Tardiness among State University Employees

Theme 1: Balancing Family Demands and Professional Obligations

This theme delves into how employees, particularly those with parenting roles, have struggled to manage early morning routines dominated by caregiving and household responsibilities that frequently conflict with their professional obligations. The participants' narratives suggest that habitual tardiness is not a result of carelessness or lack of commitment, but rather a reflection of the cumulative pressures of domestic duties, time scarcity, and the absence of adequate support systems. While this struggle was most pronounced among working mothers, some fathers also expressed similar challenges, though to a lesser extent. These overlapping demands place employees in a persistent state of role conflict, making punctuality a challenge despite their best intentions and efforts to comply with workplace expectations.

Category 1.1: Early Morning Domestic Responsibilities

Participants shared that their mornings are often consumed by a series of demanding domestic responsibilities that must be completed before reporting to work. These include preparing meals, helping children get dressed and ready for school, organizing school materials, and ensuring the home is in order. For many, especially mothers, these tasks are non-negotiable and time-sensitive, often leaving little room for flexibility. Even with the use of planners, alarms, or carefully structured routines, these overlapping responsibilities create a high-pressure environment that frequently leads to delays. The situation is further compounded when unexpected issues arise, forcing employees to make difficult choices between family care and professional punctuality. Despite genuine efforts to manage their time effectively, participants noted that the sheer volume and urgency of their caregiving duties often made tardiness unavoidable. This reflects the ongoing struggle to achieve work-life balance, which was consistently reported among female participants with caregiving roles, but less so among male employees.

"I am a mother of 5, I need to prepare everything for them before going to school, and sometimes, no matter how I try to manage my time, I still go to the office late." – SEP1, Lines 2-4, Page 2

"Being a hands-on parent, a typical workday is not easy, especially if you have small children... kids are slow to wake up, then homework." – SEP10, Lines 10-12, Page 45

Category 1.2: Lack of Support Systems

The absence of helpers or family support made it difficult to manage my time before work. Employees lacking domestic support experience more pronounced struggles with punctuality. Even tools like reminders become ineffective without additional human support. The absence of domestic helpers or supportive family members significantly exacerbated participants' challenges in managing their time before work. Employees without reliable assistance at home reported heightened difficulty in meeting morning obligations, which in turn affected their ability to arrive at the office on time. While some attempted to compensate by using alarms or other time management tools, these strategies often proved insufficient when faced with the unrelenting demands of caregiving. The lack of human support, whether from spouses, extended family, or hired help, left many participants solely responsible for tasks such as preparing meals, organizing school-related needs, and attending to young or dependent children and household chores. As a result, punctuality became a secondary concern amid the more immediate and pressing realities of household responsibilities. This highlights how structural limitations in the domestic sphere can directly influence workplace behaviors, particularly in the context of time-sensitive expectations like attendance.

"Even if I have a reminder or planner, I have my kids and house to prioritize before I go to work. As a mother, I cannot just leave them hungry or unprepared." – SEP1, Lines 17-18, Page 3

"Family responsibilities, such as helping with household chores in the morning, also added to my delays." – SEP9, Lines 19-20, Page 36

Employees, especially working parents, experience significant challenges balancing domestic responsibilities and their professional commitments. Morning routines are particularly demanding, as participants juggle tasks.

The data aligns with ten Brummelhuis and Bakker's (2012) work-home resources model, which emphasizes how a lack of resources (time, support, energy) at home can spill over into work life and impair performance, including punctuality. In comparison, Gabriel et al. (2022) reaffirmed that caregiving demands and time scarcity remain strong predictors of tardiness, particularly in public institutions. However, unlike Gabriel et al., this study highlights how the absence of extended family or domestic helpers magnifies the burden on working mothers, a nuance less emphasized in earlier work.

Theme 2: Systemic and Environmental Factors Influencing Tardiness

This theme reveals that tardiness is shaped not solely by personal habits or routines but significantly by external environmental and organizational conditions, such as transportation challenges, adverse weather, and inconsistent policy enforcement, which often lie beyond the employee's direct control. These systemic factors highlight the complex interplay between individual behavior and structural limitations, emphasizing that lateness is not merely a matter of personal discipline but also of situational constraints embedded within the broader work environment.

Category 2.1: Transportation and Weather Conditions

Participants consistently cited long travel times, limited access to reliable transportation routes, and frequent weather-related disruptions as significant external challenges that hinder their punctuality. For many, commuting to work involved navigating poorly connected or congested roadways, often made worse by infrastructure issues. Additionally, extreme weather conditions, such as heavy rains, flooding, or intense heat, further complicated travel, causing unexpected delays despite efforts to leave early. These factors, largely beyond the control of individual employees, illustrate how environmental and infrastructural barriers contribute to habitual tardiness, particularly for those residing in remote or underserved areas.

"Most of the time, I wake up early and prepare ahead, but I occasionally get late due to transportation issues in our area." – SEP5, Lies 7-8, Page 19

"Consider family factors, transportation factors, and weather conditions due to climate change." – SEP6, Lines 4-5, Page 26

"Environmentally, although I drove my motorcycle to work, I still encountered heavy traffic, ongoing road construction, and bad weather conditions, which affected my travel despite my efforts to leave early." SEP9, Lines 20-21, Page 36

"...there were months, especially if the weather is too cold and too hot, I experience severe headache..." – SEP4, Lines 2-3, Page 15

These findings support earlier observations that infrastructural and environmental barriers, rather than lack of employee discipline, often drive habitual tardiness. While Gabriel et al. (2022) primarily noted caregiving demands, this study adds that transportation and climate-related disruptions are equally significant structural contributors, particularly in provincial settings.

Category 2.2: No Clear Incentives or Penalties

Some employees expressed that the absence of consistent disciplinary measures or tangible rewards diminished their motivation to improve punctuality. When sanctions for habitual tardiness were not uniformly applied or when timely arrivals were not acknowledged or incentivized, employees perceived a lack of accountability and recognition within the system. This inconsistency fostered a sense of complacency, where lateness was neither clearly discouraged nor improvement actively encouraged.

"So far, there are no sanctions. I do not want to have one, but what will be the change of action if it is just okay?" – SEP8, Lines 13-14, Page 32

"I understand that it considers frequent lateness as a light offense with corresponding penalties, but thank you, there are still none." – SEP9, Lines 20-22, Page 37

This finding supports the Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964), which posits that employees reciprocate perceived fairness and accountability. When organizations fail to clearly communicate or enforce consequences for lateness,

employee motivation and discipline weaken (Cropanzano et al., 2017). Unlike earlier studies, which often frame tardiness as a purely individual issue, this research highlights how weak or inconsistent institutional enforcement itself fosters lateness.

3.2 Employee Perceptions and Experiences of RRACCS Sanctions on Habitual Tardiness Theme 3: Punctuality Does Not Reflect Work Performance

Employees critically challenged the traditional assumption that punctuality is a direct indicator of job effectiveness. Many participants consistently emphasized that despite occasional late arrivals, they maintained high levels of productivity, met deadlines, and fulfilled their responsibilities efficiently. However, this perspective should be understood as employee perception rather than a generalizable conclusion. Their narratives underscore a more nuanced understanding of professionalism as one that prioritizes effectiveness and impact over rigid adherence to schedules.

Category 3.1: High Performance Despite Tardiness

Many participants expressed the belief that punctuality should not be used as the sole measure of competence or productivity. They emphasized that despite instances of tardiness, they consistently fulfilled their duties, met deadlines, and contributed meaningfully to their departments. According to these respondents, occasional lateness did not hinder their work efficiency or overall performance. Instead, they argued that professional value should be assessed based on output quality and task completion, rather than rigid adherence to time-based metrics. This perspective challenges traditional views that equate timeliness with effectiveness, calling for a more nuanced understanding of employee performance.

"Even if I am late for my work, I am still effective in my daily work. I can submit my reports on or before the deadline." – SEP9, Lines 6-7, Page 45

"No, it does not affect my work performance. I do most of the work in our office, and my colleagues could agree to that." – SEP3, Lines 3-4, Page 12

"I do not think that it can affect my performance. Everything has a reason why it happens or is happening." – SEP6, Lines 5-6, Page 25

No, even if I am late, I always work effectively." - SEP8, Line 21, Page 32

Category 3.2: Tardiness as a Symptom, not the Problem

For several participants, habitual tardiness was not rooted in negligence or indifference. However, it was instead a byproduct of deeper, compounding issues such as work overload, chronic fatigue, and the demands of multitasking. Many employees reported that extended work hours, frequent overtime, and high workload pressures often led to insufficient rest, making it difficult to wake up early and prepare for work the next day. Rather than viewing their lateness as a sign of poor discipline, they framed it as a consequence of accumulated stress and the challenge of balancing multiple roles and responsibilities. This reframing highlights that tardiness can stem from systemic and psychological strain, underscoring the need to understand lateness within the broader context of employee well-being and workload management.

"Sometimes, when I do successive overtime work and stressful work, it really affects my punctuality." – SEP2, Lines 6-7, Page 8

"If I have worked overtime, I might arrive 1-15 minutes late the next day, because I have to balance all my responsibilities." – SEP3, Lines 2-3, Page 11

This theme aligns with the findings of Campbell and Wiernik (2015), who argue that job performance is a multidimensional construct, and behaviors like punctuality should be evaluated in context. It also resonates with the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). Compared with Gabriel et al. (2022), who associated tardiness with reduced overall productivity, this study suggests a more complex picture where productivity can remain intact despite frequent lateness.

3.3 Coping Mechanisms and Behavioral Responses to Disciplinary Actions for Tardiness Theme 4: Emotional Impact and Personal Reflections on Tardiness

This theme captures the complex emotional and behavioral responses of employees who experience habitual tardiness, highlighting both the internal struggles it provokes and the constructive actions it can inspire. Participants described a range of negative emotions, such as guilt, shame, anxiety, and self-disappointment that arose from repeated lateness, mainly when it affected their professional image or relationships with colleagues. At the same time, these reflections were not universal; some participants minimized their tardiness, suggesting variability in how employees internalize sanctions.

Category 4.1: Feelings of Guilt, Shame, and Disappointment

Several participants reported experiencing a range of emotional struggles tied to their habitual tardiness, including embarrassment, frustration, and internal conflict. For many, repeated late arrivals triggered a sense of personal disappointment and anxiety, especially when their behavior clashed with their own standards of professionalism. Some shared that being consistently late negatively impacted their self-image, making them feel less competent or reliable in the eyes of colleagues and supervisors. Peer criticism or subtle judgments from coworkers further intensified these emotions, leading to feelings of isolation or diminished confidence. These responses highlight that habitual tardiness carries not only administrative consequences but also significant emotional weight for those affected.

"There were days that I felt ashamed of being late because some would tease me... Despite that, I still do my job and the tasks assigned to me." – SEP2, Lines 19-20, Page 2

"I felt disappointed with myself. However, looking back at what I was going through, I really could not entirely place the blame on myself.' – SEP5, Lines 4-5, Page 20

"Upon receiving the formal notices, I felt worried and disappointed in myself." – SEP9, Lines 14, Page 37

Category 4.2: Realization and Desire for Self-Improvement

For other participants, formal reminders or disciplinary actions served as pivotal turning points in their behavior. Being called out, whether through written notices, verbal reminders, or official sanctions, prompted moments of reflection that challenged their existing habits and attitudes toward punctuality. These experiences, though initially uncomfortable or disheartening, became catalysts for change. Some employees reported becoming more conscious of their time management, adopting new routines, or seeking support to improve their attendance. The act of being formally held accountable highlighted the seriousness of their tardiness and encouraged them to take concrete steps toward improvement. This suggests that, when delivered constructively, formal interventions can lead to meaningful behavioral shifts.

"Since the incident, I have taken concrete steps to improve my punctuality, such as adjusting my routine and setting earlier alarms." – SEP2, Lines 5-6, Page 9

...it made me reflect on my habits. And I believe I have been making improvements." – SEP5, Lines 5-6, Page 20

"This policy is a necessary reminder for me to improve, and I think I have made significant changes to manage my time better." – SEP5, Lines 1-2, Page 21

"Stern warning motivated me to improve my time management and daily routine so I could avoid being late." – SEP9, Lines 14-15, Page 40

"...promote better sleep and health habits could indirectly help employees, including myself, to improve punctuality." – SEP9, Lines 2-3, Page 41

This interpretation resonates with Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1991, 2000), which suggests that disorienting experiences (e.g., being called out for lateness or feeling ashamed) can prompt critical self-reflection and eventually lead to behavioral and attitudinal transformation. In contrast with prior studies that frame disciplinary measures as punitive, the present findings reveal that employees can interpret sanctions as

constructive reminders for self-improvement when delivered appropriately.

4.0 Conclusion

This study contributes to the field of public sector human resource management by demonstrating that habitual employee tardiness is not merely a violation of rules but a multidimensional phenomenon shaped by personal responsibilities, organizational practices, environmental constraints, and emotional well-being. It challenges the conventional punitive approach embedded in disciplinary frameworks such as the Revised Rules on Administrative Cases in the Civil Service (RRACCS). It offers a more nuanced, human-centered strategy. The study's central contribution is the development of the TIME CARE framework (Tardiness Intervention through Management, Empathy, and Consistent Accountability with Responsive Engagement). This practical model redefines punctuality as a shared institutional value supported by empathetic leadership, structural support, and fair accountability.

Rather than relying solely on sanctions, the findings highlight that improving punctuality requires structural reforms and employee-centered interventions. A shift from reactive discipline to preventive and supportive strategies is essential. When institutions integrate personal, organizational, and systemic realities into their policies, tardiness becomes not only manageable but transformable into an opportunity for strengthening trust, morale, and performance.

Based on the emergent themes, interventions can be synthesized into five strategic directions:

- 1. Flexible Work Systems sliding start times, hybrid or compressed schedules, and institutional support for working parents.
- 2. Transportation and Infrastructure Support shuttle services, transport subsidies, weather-contingent attendance policies.
- 3. Policy Reform and Accountability clear, consistently applied attendance guidelines that balance discipline with restorative approaches.
- 4. Holistic Performance Evaluation recognition systems and appraisal frameworks that value both output and professional conduct, such as punctuality.
- 5. Emotional Wellness and Support Programs counseling, mentoring, and leadership training to transform guilt and shame into motivation for growth.

From a policy perspective, this study underscores the need to revisit how tardiness is treated within civil service regulations and HR frameworks. While RRACCS provides necessary sanctions, the findings suggest that supportive mechanisms must complement disciplinary measures. State universities and other public institutions could integrate the TIME CARE framework (Figure 1) into HRD programs, leadership training, and policy design, ensuring that punctuality is promoted not only as compliance but as a component of institutional culture and employee well-being.

In addition to its practical implications, the study opens avenues for future research. Longitudinal studies could assess the long-term impact of flexible work and wellness interventions on punctuality. Comparative research across different public sector organizations could test the adaptability of the TIME CARE framework in varied contexts. Furthermore, quantitative analyses may help measure the link between punctuality, productivity, and employee morale, providing empirical grounding for policy reform.

In conclusion, this study reframes habitual tardiness as an organizational challenge requiring empathy, clarity, and systemic support. The TIME CARE framework advances by providing both theoretical enrichment and a practical roadmap for public institutions seeking to balance discipline with compassion. When implemented thoughtfully, such an approach transforms punctuality from a contested rule into a marker of a healthy, equitable, and thriving workplace.

TIME CARE

Tardiness Intervention through Management, Empathy, and Consistent Accountability with Responsive Engagement

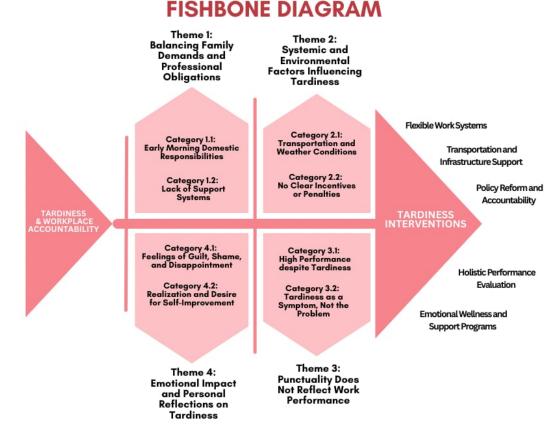


Figure 1. Time Care (Fishbone Diagram

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Amy Y. Refuncion: Conceptualization, data gathering, data analysis Jose Marlon J. Refuncion Jr.: Data gathering, data analysis Elmer A. Irene: Conceptualization, data analysis

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7.0 Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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