

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

# LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ELDERLY REMARRIED WIDOWS: ADJUSTMENT AND COPING TO NEW ROLES AS BI-PARENT

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**Abstract**

**Background:** At present, the existing studies which explore the factors influencing elderly widows to remarry and their achievement towards successful step-parenthood are limited. Remarriage and step-parenthood are integrated into the complexities of the social phenomena in human experiences, which entail coping and adjustments to life changes.

**Objective:** The study explored the lived experiences of elderly widows regarding coping and adjustments to remarriage and step-parenting as new roles.

**Methods:** The study made use of a phenomenological approach, particularly the transcendental approach, to have a better understanding of their lived-experience after remarriage. Self-made open-ended questions were raised in the series of interviews using interview guides. The study was conducted in Iligan City, Philippines, where all the six participants reside. Purposive sampling was used wherein participants are selected based on criteria necessary to answer the objectives of the study: (1) He/ she should be at least 60 years of age; (2) must be remarried after the death of the previous spouse; and, (3) must be a bi-parent. Thematic analysis was used for data analysis.

**Result:** Three themes emerged in all interviews: (1) adjusting to a new marital role, (2) sharing responsible parenthood, and (3) rewarding new parental role. Results highlighted bi-parenting among elderly widows as an aptly complex lived- experience as widows enter remarriage.

**Conclusion:** It is concluded that the remarried widows view life after remarriage with the new family and children as a positive experience despite the challenges. Remarriage and being with another family can improve the wellbeing of the elderly widows. Having children and a new partner around is an opportunity to bring back a complete family structure together. This research recommends further that the understanding of their experiences and phenomena should be the basis of identifying their status. Researchers and clinicians should provide essential information to elderly remarried widows about the healthy and proper coping and adjustment to this life-changing event.

**KEYWORDS**

bi-parenthood; coping; elderly; remarriage; widowhood

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## BACKGROUND

Widowhood or the loss of the previous spouse encroaches many changes in family dynamics. This experience is a painful event in the life of anyone who just lost their partner on their behalf and as their co-parent. These issues are more significant among individuals owing particularly to cultural and social aspects. Women widows experience increased feelings of sorrow, aloofness, and guilt than men. The sociocultural context may also play a role in the tendency of women to reject depressive symptoms. The significant and profound distress can be indications of psychiatric problem usually needing serious attention (Perkins et al., 2016). Several literature reported that widows remarry to find alternatives to their loss (Connidis, 2010; Ewherido, 2015; Wu, Schimmele, & Ouellet, 2015).

Remarriage is accompanied by new roles and one of which is step-parenthood. The new spouse becomes stepparents of the previous spouse's children and vice versa. Stepparents in the blended family

need to adjust and pay attention to establishing a good relationship with the children of the new partner. This can strengthen the likelihood of success by putting into consideration the needs of the kids. Personality, gender, and age are relevant, according to Kemp, Segal, and Robinson (2013), but the basic needs of the children should be met to achieve a good relationship. Each child is different and will display the stepparent how fast or slow to know them individually. Given enough time, patience, and interest, planning is necessary to sustain the relationship, and most children will eventually give stepparents a chance (Kemp et al., 2013). Many researchers are suggesting that stepparents who show their stepchildren appreciation, affection, and love, and no expression of hostility, and hatred, are competent in giving support and able to positively influence children's adjustment to a new family (Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2018). A good relationship between stepparent and stepchildren might also buffer stress linked with typical stepfamily difficulties (Jensen & Howard, 2015). The means of developing a positive relationship between the

stepparent and stepchildren takes time, even in the best of cases (Papernow, 2013). The development of a positive relationship might be particularly gradual when including stepchildren in early teens (Jensen & Howard, 2015). The presence of mature stepchildren when parents are already elderly may only be stressful when the quality of the relationship between the parents and the children are poor.

According to *Psychology Today* (n.d.), parenting is an ultimate long-lasting investment. One must be ready to decide to get involved in it. The joy of the couples lower the moment they become mother and father and may even get worse before the role gets bigger. But still, it can be the best rewarding work of a lifetime in the long run. It is essential for parents to give their children a good start, but it is also significant to recognize that children have their own set of temperaments. One of the parents' responsibilities is to prepare their children to become independent. Research shows that those left behind parents experienced higher levels of anxiety, loneliness, depression and had lower scores on psychological health than older parents with no migrant children (Sutinah, 2020; Thapa, Visentin, Kornhaber, & Cleary, 2018). A meta-analysis study also found that the empty-nest elderly's mental health is poor compared to non-empty nesters (Lv et al., 2013).

Having a close relationship between parent and child has a positive effect on parents' self-esteem (Keys, 2015). There are also experiences of parenthood that may potentially create parental strain and distress, such as parental bereavement, coresidence with adult children, and step-parenthood. Bi-parent was operationally coined by the investigator as a person who plays two roles, which is a parent to two sets of siblings after remarrying a spouse with children. What makes remarrying sets apart from the rest is that the couple has to make necessary adjustments in establishing rapport, gaining trust, and be loved by the children belonging to the previous spouse. To sustain the relationship, one has to be adaptive. Adjustments must be made not only with his or her new partner but also with the family dynamics along with the sets of children. The experience which they hold on as a bi-parent is what this section of this study also wanted to explore.

Based on the relevant literature, effective coping and favorable adjustments are critical ingredients to successful remarriage and step-parenthood. At present, the existing studies which explore the factors influencing elderly widows to remarry and the achievement towards successful step-parenthood among elderlies are limited. Remarriage and step-parenthood are integrated into the complexities of the social phenomena in human experiences, which need further exploration in which this study aims to achieve. The study explored the lived-experiences of widows regarding coping and adjustments in remarriage and parenting as new roles. By gaining a more in-depth understanding of how elderly widows live with coping and adjusting to remarriage and parenting as new roles, better insights will be elucidated about this group of people.

## METHODS

### Study Design

This study utilized phenomenology research design specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach. A transcendental phenomenology focuses the study around rich, textural descriptions,

structural descriptions, and the essence of the study (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental phenomenology is useful for describing the phenomenon using the participants' experiences, perceptions, and voices. During the series of interviews, the investigator not only observed what they said but also their gestures, tones, and other cues, which can help derive the meaning of what they experienced.

### Participants

The study utilized purposive sampling wherein a total of six participants were selected based on the following inclusion criteria: 1) He/ she should be at least 60 years of age; (2) must be remarried after the death of the previous spouse; and, (3) must be a bi-parent.

### Data Collection

Data collection was carried out for five months from January 2017 to May 2017 from the different Barangays of Iligan City, Philippines. The data were collected through in-depth interviews, which were audio-taped. The individual interviews were done using specific open-ended questions. Face-to-face interviews were done based on the convenience of the participants. Each interview runs for about 30-50 minutes. Some interview was conducted in the workplace, and some are at the home of participants. The interview was repeated three times just to get enough information from each participant. The data was saturated when no new information was added to what has been obtained from other participants.

### Data Analysis

The data were coded by three coders and were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with the following steps: 1) Familiarizing yourself with your data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, 6) Producing the report

### Trustworthiness/Rigor

The four considerations for trustworthiness and rigor were utilized in this study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Triangulation was observed by asking the same research questions to all participants and obtained several methods to answer a similar inquiry. The credibility of the study was examined by asking the participants to review and check their responses that were transcribed to confirm if that is what they meant. The transferability of the study result can be assumed that similar answers would probably be provided. The whole research process was reviewed by the experienced research supervisors in the University as a dependability testing stage. The data categories were comprehensively defined and were harmonious in the findings; this can validate and justify the future replicability of this study.

### Ethical Consideration

The investigator ensured the protection of the ethics rights of the study participants and that there were no ethical transgressions committed in the conduct of the study. Data gathering started after the approval of the College Research, Ethics, and Extension Committee (CREEC) of the Institute. All six study participants gave their approved consent to participate in the study and informed them that they could abstain from participating at any time and assured them of confidentiality and anonymity of their identity. Furthermore, the investigator asked the

participants whether they prefer to participate in the interview at home or their preferred place.

## RESULTS

The final six participants were chosen, 50% were females, and 50% are males. The mean age of the participants was 62.67 years, and 7.83 was the average number of years since the participants' spouses passed away. All six participants had children, and 100% reported having children from both new and old spouse. The average years of being remarried among all the six participants are 10.5 years.

**Table 1** Participants of the Study and their Demographic Profile

Participants' Code	Age	Gender	No. Children	No. Years Widowed	No. Years Remarried
P1	60	Female	4	11	17
P2	64	Male	3	2	4
P3	69	Female	6	19	4
P4	61	Male	3	3	9
P5	60	Female	5	4	19
P6	62	Male	4	8	10

Several themes emerged from the series of interviews that were conducted. The investigator was able to classify threads woven during the course of the interviews and the themes that overlapped with other themes. After long deliberation, three solid themes remained: (1) adjusting to a new marital role, (2) sharing responsible parenthood, (3) rewarding new parental role.

### Theme 1: Adjusting to a New Marital Role

The first theme refers to participants' association with their new spouse, which is known as adjusting to a new marital role. The marriage quality is usually determined by concepts of happiness, satisfaction, adjustment, and evaluations of the couples (Kışlak-Tutarel & Göztepe, 2012). The status of the participants of having a partner makes them feel better and happier. The new partner was perceived as a buddy whom they can share responsibilities with as parents to both of their children. Their daily living activities with a partner in parenthood seemed to be coming back like that with the previous first spouse. The participants expressed happiness over the attention they get from the partner:

"They always fight with her previous partner; that is why we don't argue as much as possible. We just talk it over. I know how to approach him if we have problems and vice versa." **P1**

"I only have a little adjustment when we got married because we all know what we wanted, and that is to be happy." **P5**

At the beginning of the partnership, one of the coping and adjustments made by the informant is by following what his new spouse wants. This strategy helps the informant to get to know more of themselves and their spouse. The participants explained that:

"We never had a fight ever since we started living together because I just followed whatever he wants. We really do understand each other". **P3**

"We talk as often as possible, and we understood each other's need; that is why we do give and take. We cheer for each other." **P6**

"We used to fight regularly because I am a hard-headed person, but I realized later on that maybe I need to change and instead listen and follow my wife" **P2**

### Theme 2: Sharing Responsible Parenthood

The participants have recommended that repartnering should be established before remarriage since this makes the adjustment easier. Repartnering prepares the participants to deal with the transitions of their journey like remarriage and bi-parenting. Agree with your new spouse on how you want to raise the children together, and make a plan necessary for coping and adjustments to parenting styles before remarriage (Segal & Robinson, 2019).

Participants explained that having new parents is not that easy for both the children and the new parent. It was found out in the study that the elderly new spouse seemed to initiate to reach out to the children. The children easily welcome the idea of their elderly parent getting a new spouse and them with a new elderly parent. The new spouse fulfills the role which their children's previous mothers and fathers did.

Others compare their new spouse as a more responsible parent than the previous spouse. The new spouse treats their own children and the children of the previous spouse suitably. They support children's physiological and psychosocial needs. Transcriptions of the individual interviews highlight these results, as shown below:

"There is a big difference with my previous spouse, wherein I am now happy because my new spouse has no vices. My children are well taken care of by him, and he treats them like his own children" **P1**

"He has friended all my children even before we got married and treated them like his own." **P5**

Sharing responsible parenthood with the new children seemed to be part of the instinct of the elderly who gets remarried. The experience seemed to be part of the entire process of remarriage. The participants claimed that their new spouse just instinctively knows to decide which is among the approaches is right in helping her children:

"He does what is the best thing to do...he helps my children" **P3**

"Whenever my children have problems, may it be emotional or monetary problems, she is always there to help." **P6**

### Theme 3: Rewarding New Parental Role

Under any circumstances, parenting is a challenging responsibility. But it is more challenging to be a stepparent as you are moving into a family that is already complicated (Krasnoperova, 2019). In this study, all participants claimed that coping and adjustments are necessary when getting involved in this experience. In all transitions in life, effective coping and adjustments are needed and not only in remarriage among the elderly. The love and security which they lose before are now contented by the presence of their new spouse.

The rewarding experience is also motivated by the good treatment of the new spouse to their children. It makes the decision and experience even more rewarding than just getting remarried. The adjustment made by the new spouse to the children seemed not only to be accepted by the parent of the child but also with the children themselves as well.

"I am very happy to be with my new partner, and I love him dearly, he is really concern about me and the children" P1

"My children are happier now that they a new father who is always there to guide them. They sometimes argue about things, but at the end of the day, they are again ok with each other." P5

Remarriage becomes a reason for acting in a certain way that makes them more adjusted and has effectively coped from widowhood. The participants claimed that they were driven to change since they thought their problems were relieved with the presence of the new spouse. Having a partner makes them more motivated to decide and be effective in whatever decisions they take. The experience even made the entire family more united as it seemed like the family is complete again.

"My life changed because I have someone to help me with my problems, although I know how to manage my problems before; but it is different if you have someone to help you make a decision." P2

"You have someone to help you solve your problems. You have someone to help you decide on things which you have difficulty deciding before. My family is bigger now with no fights because we are united" P6

## DISCUSSION

The first theme emphasizes the adjustment of the remarried widows to a new marital role. Marital adjustment is the satisfaction and happy couples have in their marriage (Yesiltepe, 2011). They become better and happier as they share responsibilities with their new spouse. The new couple spends activities together, which is seemingly even similar to their previous spouse. Throughout, the experience is viewed positively, which they missed during widowhood. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2017), most couples want their new marriages to work out well for everyone. Hopefully, they can achieve their hope, having learned from previous experiences. However, an adjustment has to be made by getting to know what the new spouse wants. This is one way of learning more about themselves and their spouse.

The second theme emphasizes the transition of sharing responsible parenthood. According to the American Psychological Association (2017), a marriage that brings with it children from a previous marriage presents many challenges, particularly in financial and living arrangements, issues with previous marriage, and changes in parenting. Repartnering during widowhood, are signs of highly adaptive responses, which prepares them to integrate the concept of remarriage and bi-parenting in their lives.

Having new parents is not that easy for both the children and the new parent. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2017), the biological family of the kids may be reminded of them. Sharing their parent with a new spouse and stepsiblings, they may manifest jealousy when the mother or father displays attention to them. Kids may feel more like a stranger than being a part of the blended family and feels awkward having to get used to two fathers or two mothers. However, this differs when the children of the remarried widows are mature enough, as in the case of elderly widows who got blended with another family because of remarriage.

Elderly new spouses seemed to initiate to reach out to the new set of children. Making contact with each other to begin working toward being more at ease with talking about the child makes the children more comfortable. The conveniences can be felt by both parties. The end goal is to reassure the children that they do not need to choose between developing a relationship with the stepparent and the love of the biological parent (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017).

Children easily welcome the idea of their new elderly parent. The adjustment in remarriage is not only experienced by the couple. The children also need to adjust to their new blended family. The level of approval and acceptance grows as they get to know their stepsiblings and stepparent better. Life stages seemed to show different reactions. Good parental relationships develop quicker with younger children (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017).

The new spouse fulfills the role of the children's previous parent. The interview even showed that a new spouse is more responsible. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics (2017), children will typically worry about their parent's remarriage. After remarriage, the couple expectedly will bring a new father or mother figure into their home. Children will feel like they lose the love and attention of their other father, and comparisons are just normal reactions by the children during this adjustment period. Eventually, the child becomes adaptable to the changes in family dynamics. It has been noted that in elderlies, the responsible sharing of parenthood is instinctive. Elderlies can decide which among the approaches is right in helping his spouses' children.

The last theme defines the new parenting role as fulfilling. Coping and adjustments are necessary when getting involved in this experience. The kids' transfer from a home with a solo parent to a new family that may now include stepparent and even stepsiblings. The family function, chores, and routines may also even change (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017). It is surprising to note that love and security are well- provided by the new parent. Both the children and the new parent are motivated by the good treatment of each other. They make the decision and experience even more rewarding than just getting remarried with parenting.

Furthermore, the adjustment has to be made in a two-way process. The new parent and the children adjust to each other's convenience and principles. At first, it may be harder for children to find some space they can call their own. It is recommended that everyone needs to take part and adjust to the new system of the house since it takes time for a family member to adapt to the new set up (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2017).

The newly established relationship is nourished when sincerity and care are felt by the children from the new spouse. This concept of bi-parenting is an aptly complex experience that one has to explore and study. The need to satisfy the spouse is a positive sign of acceptance to the new role. Remarrying comes with different practices and may have many issues regarding the relationship of the children with their new parent and vice versa, and how the parent will divide tasks or responsibilities. The most formidable challenge in remarriage is making a structural plan to build and run a new family with everyone's favor to meet each other's own distinct necessities. That is why most

see this as a challenge and an opportunity to find happiness with their new partner at the same time.

### Implications of the Study

The result of this study can help facilitate the acceptance of the process of remarriage and adaptation to changes in the lives of remarried elderly widows. Hence, the awareness and response gained out of the research findings will help promote fulfillment towards aging and reduction of the societal pressure to remarriage.

The result of this study may be used by the nurse clinicians, especially in their practice, by using validation, metaphors, and psychoeducation of the clients to help them learn how to handle widowhood and the coping needed for new responsibilities as a new spouse and bi-parent to a new set of children. More studies may also be conducted by the researchers to gain more understanding about the experiences of remarried widows. Other implications include the need for more accessible resources for bi-parents by the clinicians, such as family education, finances, and elderly care in communities.

### Recommendations

This research recommends further that the understanding of their experiences and phenomena should be the basis of identifying their status. The coping of the person has been proven erratic in some ways due to traditions and norms defined by the society as generalized. The individual experiences seemed to matter most, as demonstrated in this research. The in-depth understanding of the benefits of remarrying and their fulfillment towards aging may be further explored using the results of this study as a basis.

Researchers and clinicians have an obligation to provide essential information to elderly remarried widows about the healthy and proper coping and adjustment to this life-changing event. More studies may also be conducted by the researchers to gain more understanding about the experiences of remarried widows. Other implications include the need for more accessible resources for bi-parents by the clinicians, such as family education, finances, and elderly care in communities.

### CONCLUSION

Even though there were definite problems raised with every theme, there are issues that fit into these categories, displaying that these elderly face challenges that affect their everyday lives. The happiness, support for resources, and role transition among elderly widows may not be totally accounted for in researches due to its complexity.

However, when based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the remarried widows view life after remarriage with the new family and children as a positive experience despite the challenges. Remarriage and being with another family can improve the wellbeing of the elderly widows. It has been a common viewpoint among the elderly that a second relationship is better than the past. Overall, the participants viewed remarriage and bi-parenting as a fulfilling decision. Having children and a new partner around is an opportunity to bring back a complete family structure together.

The lived experiences are always involved with processes and phases which are constantly changing. For the widows, this stage in their lives has been perceived as unpleasant. The phases of remarrying and

becoming part of the new family as a bi-parent are fulfilling. The support from the peers and members of the family for remarriage is highly recommended as these enhance adjustment and coping. Having a more extensive support network, and the presence of people around them makes them feel more secure and their needs fulfilled.

### Declaration of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest to be declared.

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