Research Article

Surviving Vulnerabilities of Isolation among Widowed Empty Nesters

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ABSTRACT

A sufficient number of empty nesters living in isolation had been increasing in population, thus it is encouraged to provide a plethora of research data and studies on gerontology and isolation that could contribute to their wellbeing. This study utilized the descriptive phenomenological analysis and purposive sampling method to determine the five participants. Inclusion criteria were established to narrow down participants with common conditions. Data were gathered through online interviews and analyzed using Lichtman's 3 C's comprised of codes, categories, and concepts. The following themes emerged: economic vulnerability, physical vulnerability, social vulnerability, emotional vulnerability, coping with isolation vulnerabilities, and hopeful aspirations. In conclusion, empty nesters may experience multiple challenges that made them vulnerable in many aspects, but they were also able to develop coping strategies to manage these vulnerabilities. The limitations encountered in this study may be improved by exploring the experiences of empty nesters from other socio-economic categories and conducting a mixed-method study that would generate a broad range of data. The result of the study exposes various vulnerabilities that contribute to challenges encountered by empty nesters. Since the results are limited from generalizing the entire senior citizen population, it could be noted that the resiliency to survive challenging situations promote a holistic approach for aging and positive psychology as results provided varied sources for coping which ranges from both the internal and external sources. Survival elements of connectedness and transcending difficult situations affirm the practicality of promoting life meaning especially during difficult situations.

Keywords: empty nesters, isolation, phenomenological design, Philippines, vulnerabilities

Background

The aged population is one sector of every country that has been vulnerable even before the pandemic, and this can be broken down into different classifications. One of these is the empty nesters, a curious but common condition among the aging population. According to Chen et al. (2020), it refers to the years a couple would be together between the start of the departure of their last child from home and the death of one of the spouses. It implies that it usually includes empty nest couples and individuals as "older people who are living alone" (Wang et al., 2021). It is also known as the "post parental stage" (Chen et al., 2020), a period when children have moved towards college, worked, or established a family. There has been a rise in awareness and research focusing on this group of people as various sociological and economic shifts unfold in the last couple of decades.

A census published by the US Census Bureau (2014) reported that there are roughly 22.5 million empty nest couples in the United States. Yao et al. (2019) indicated around 2015, half of adults in China were empty nesters, and by 2030, the proportion of empty nest households will reach 90 percent. Specifically, the data reported by china.org.cn in September 2021 showed that China has at least 23.4 million empty nesters. Siddiqui (2020) noted that urbanization and economic development led the younger population in countries like China, Brazil, India, and Indonesia to migrate to cities with more work opportunities. Government policies such as the one-child policy in China (Zhang, 2020) have led to children having the sole responsibility of caring for the elderly.

It has been over a year since the pandemic started, yet various sectors are still scrambling to cope with the virus-related problems that have transcended beyond the medical field and affected all aspects of society. Nielsen et al. (2021) pointed out that the older population and people having comorbidities are at higher risk during the pandemic. Furthermore, Hajek and König (2021) articulated that since older adults are at greater risk of complications from the virus, their age group is discouraged from leaving the house and physically contacting others. This basic policy enacted worldwide has contributed to the already predominant case of isolation among empty nesters.

Previously, Abalos (2020) projected that by 2035 there will be 12.8 percent of Filipinos with age 60 and above, making the Philippines an aging society, with 56% of older females are widowed while 13% percent of older people live alone, and most of them are women, according to Cruz et al. (2019). In western Visayas, a study conducted by Hijalda (2018) indicated that Ilonggo empty nesters showed both negative and positive feelings to the empty nester syndrome experience.

Recent studies on empty nesters focused mainly on the empty nest syndrome (Piper & Breckenridge-Jackson, 2017), quality of life (He et al., 2020), and mental health (Zhang et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2016) specifically on loneliness (Wang et al., 2017; Cheng et al., 2015), depression (Zhang et al., 2020; Zhai et al., 2015), and coping (Su et al., 2018). Despite the rise on interest on empty nest studies especially in China, there is a dearth in studies on experiences of isolation as well as looking into the empty nest phenomenon in the country.

A quantitative study by Wang et al. (2021) pointed out that the empty nest and widowhood periods are two of the most critical stages for the elderly as they entail adjustment to new situations in the later part of life, with Zhang (2020) suggesting to also focus on widowed empty nesters. By looking into their experiences, better understanding of their plight can be promoted and findings of this study can contribute to areas of gerontology, developmental, and clinical psychology as the Philippines approaches the status of an aging society.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of isolation of widowed empty nesters in Negros Occidental. Specifically, it sought to answer the following:
1. What are the experiences of isolation of empty nesters?
2. How do empty nesters experience isolation?

Methods

Research design. This research employed a qualitative research design using phenomenological approach. Qualitative research aims

to understand better and comprehend human interactions and societal processes, and the purpose of phenomenology is to describe and comprehend the essence of individuals' lived experiences when they encounter particular phenomena (Lichtman, 2013). This method aided the researcher to delve and understand more the lived experiences of the empty nesters particularly their thoughts, feelings and interactions.

Participants. The participants of the study were widowed empty nesters living within Negros Occidental. They were identified using purposive homogenous sampling technique, which according to Rai and Thapa (2015) aims to focus on particular characteristics of a population that are of interest where they share the same or very similar characteristics or traits. To guarantee that the participants of the study would have been through the same phenomenon, the inclusion criteria for empty nesters include the following: participants should be either a widow or widower, recipient of government assistance, have no auditory and psychological handicap, and are at least 60 years old. The researcher asked the assistance from the Office of the Senior Citizens Affair (OSCA) leaders across cities and municipalities in the province in providing the participants for the study.

Five female participants were interviewed and they identified themselves to be living independently. All of the participants had children of legal age and already lived separately and were self-sufficient. The participants' husbands had passed away for more than a decade already; the most recent became a widow in 2003. Being widowed, they became the breadwinner. They also reported having relatives and/or children living nearby, although three out of five participants already have at least one child in Manila.

Research instrument. An unstructured in-depth interview guide was utilized to explore the point of view, experiences, and feelings of the widowed empty nesters. According to Minhat (2015) an unstructured in-depth interview guide is an intensive, open-ended, and discovery-oriented method to obtain detailed information from an individual. For this study, it is composed of a series of open-ended questions which were asked from the participants as their experiences gradually unfolded.

Data collection procedure. Prior to data collection, an interview guide was first prepared, which includes identification of areas covered for the interview, identification of biographic information, creation of a script for the opening and closing of the interview, and a list of questions that can lead the interview and how to phrase them. Then, the researcher contacted the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) personnel of the Negros Occidental province, who is in charge of the OSCA. The personnel provided a list of OSCA leaders with their phone numbers. The researcher called the numbers wherein 11 were able to answer the call, then the nature of the research topic was discussed with them. They responded with a pledge to look for possible participants, and out of 11, five were able to refer contact numbers of neighbors or relatives of the participants. A research assistant from Bago City identified the other participant who referred another from the same barangay.

The researcher conducted an online interview using the phone of the research assistant for the two participants and relatives of the other two, while one of the participants used the phone of a DSWD personnel. Before the start of the interview, a consent form was secured from the participants, and they were oriented about the purpose of the study, their participation in the study, how the information would be gathered and treated, and the confidentiality and privacy of the data gathered. This also gave the researcher the opportunity to establish rapport with them.

The participants were asked about their cognitive, affective, and behavioral experiences during the interview in which the researcher intended to suspend personal notions regarding the topic. The participants were first asked basic or easier questions, then difficult or abstract ones. Probing questions were delivered as the interview progressed. The researcher was respectful of the answers provided and let the participants finish their statements. Some key ideas were paraphrased to validate the participants' answers. The psychosocial intervention was also conducted on the participants

wherein the researcher processed their negative emotions and provided counseling. It was explained to them that their emotions are valid and normal and they identified ways for them to manage these emotions. The researcher then expressed gratitude towards the participants after the interview and proceeded to transcribe the data. Recordings were transcribed verbatim. For the follow-up questions, succeeding communications were established through phone calls and chat messages depending on the availability of the phone owners and the participants.

Data analysis procedure. Thematic analysis was employed to analyze, classify, and present themes or patterns relating to the data gathered using Lichtman's (2013) phenomenological method of three (3) C's – coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing.

Coding. In the coding phase, the researcher would carefully read interview transcripts while creating the initial codes, and more were added after rereading them. This was done one transcript at a time. Coding is an iterative process and is further refined with each reading until all interviews are coded. The nonverbal aspects of the participants' interactions were also noted, such as their facial expressions, body language, voice pitch, emotional expressions, and nuances like sadness and laughter. After the initial codes were created from all of the transcripts, the initial codes were revisited by rereading the transcripts and revising the initial codes. There was redundancy in some of

the initial codes; thus, they were removed or renamed.

Categorizing. Since the codes were already modified, an initial list of categories and central ideas was developed. At this point, the researcher continued with the iterative process. Categories were revisited and modified when the researcher recognized that some categories are less significant than others by ranking them per the importance of each category per the number of occurrences in responses, resulting in a combination of similar categories into one set or subset while. After additional rereading and modifying the initial list, the categories and subcategories were revisited, redundancies were removed, and essential elements were determined.

Conceptualizing. The last task in the process is moving from categories to concepts. In this part, categories and subcategories were revisited to remove redundant categories and identify key themes per the purpose of the research. As the data were read and reread, some themes appeared to be richer and more compelling than others.

After thematic analysis, the researcher ran an audit trail on the themes and sub-themes to confirm that the findings were based on the participants' responses rather than the researcher's assumptions and prejudices. The researcher met with a designated auditor to read the transcripts, examine the themes and sub-themes, and make suggestions and revisions on the identified themes and sub-themes.
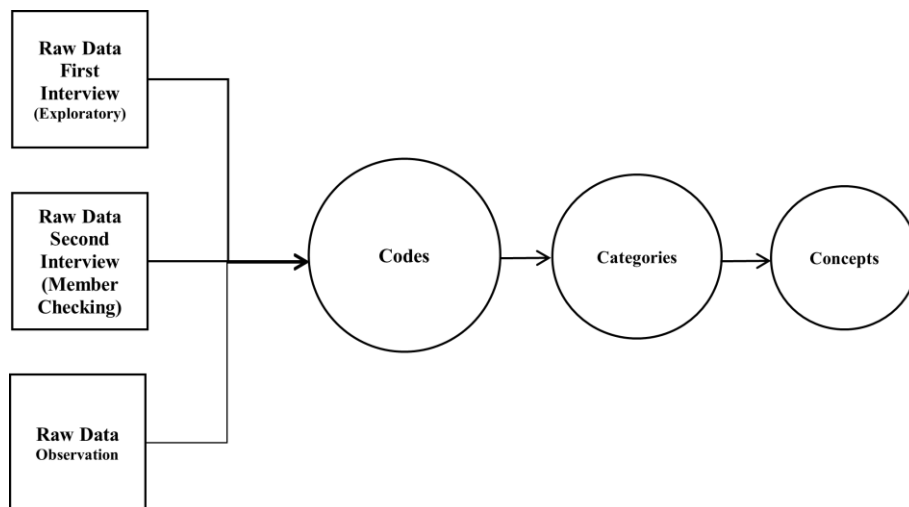

Figure 1. Lichtman's (2013) Three (3) C's of Data Analysis

Data Trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) introduced the four criteria for evaluating qualitative findings and enhancing trustworthiness as it is a way for the researchers to evaluate the worth of the research findings. These criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which can be incorporated into research design and used to assess qualitative data to determine the validity of the instrument.

Credibility is where "the researcher ensures and imparts to the reader supporting evidence that the results accurately represent what was studied" (Johnson et al., 2020). Credibility is analogous to internal validity, the approximate truth about casual relationships or the impact of one variable on another. At the start of data gathering, the researcher established trust and rapport with the participants. The researcher conducted member check by feeding back the emerging framework to the empty nesters for data verification to make sure that the data was captured properly and make clarifications.

Dependability ensures that the study results can be replicated, assuming the participants, coders, and setting are all the same (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Inquiry audit was the technique used by the researcher to establish dependability. Field notes were also utilized, consisting of a collection of records relating to the researcher's observations during the interview: facial expressions, body language, emotional expressions, and nuances, and were used in conjunction with the interview the researcher conducted.

Transferability is the degree to which the findings can be transferred or generalized to other settings, contexts, or populations. According to Johnson et al. (2020), this is accomplished by providing detailed contextual information so that readers can determine whether the results are applicable to their or other situations. This was established by ensuring a rich and thick description of the findings by providing direct quotes of the empty nesters which provides descriptive adequacy to facilitate a meaningful understanding of the experience with those in similar situations.

According to Johnson et al. (2020), *confirmability* is the extent to which the research findings are objective and not the interpretations or bias of the researcher. This was ensured through an audit trail by having a PhD in Clinical Psychology check the raw data and construction of themes to reviewed the accuracy of themes identified from data collected.

Ethical considerations. The researcher addressed the following components of ethical standards in research to ensure respect for every person involved in the research process.

Social value. Filipinos are extremely family-oriented, but with the slew of economic opportunities and alteration of values, there were many older people, including empty nesters, whose needs were neglected both by the private and public sectors. There are also long-standing biases unfavorable to older people and those living alone. Ageism influences the perception of older people and aging, hindering successful transition and adaptation. This study contributes to the Department of Social Welfare and Development and non-governmental organizations in developing programs that would bring together empty nesters with their community for mutual social support and encourage self-sustainability in terms of economic means by generating livelihood programs. As for senior citizen empty nesters may they have better understanding of their psychological and emotional condition for them to convey their cognitive and emotional processes in a clearer way.

Informed consent. The participation of empty nesters in the study was voluntary, and they were made aware in Hiligaynon that in any event that they decide to withdraw during or after the data gathering process, they may rightfully do so. They agreed to be part of the study and affixed their signature in the informed consent.

Vulnerability of the research participants. The participants of the study were older people and immune-compromised. Hence, interviews were conducted through video call through Facebook Messenger. Furthermore, participants were not able to finish their basic education and falls on the low income category thus, Hiligaynon was used during interview to facilitate clear understanding and they were provided by the researcher with network data for connection.

Risks and benefits. Since the participants were of high health risk, health protocols were followed, such as no interviews were conducted face-to-face to minimize the risk of contagion. Notwithstanding the risk, the study provided the empty nesters to vent their thoughts and emotions. After some time with limited interaction with others, it was time for them to interact with someone for a longer period. All of these were beneficial to the empty nesters' mental health.

Privacy and confidentiality. The real names were withheld for the study and instead, a pseudonym was utilized. Data were stored in a container accessible only to the researcher and disposed of using a machine shredder. Other data that need to be kept for some time are stored in a laptop used only by the researcher and no one else and protected by a password. Ensuring the participants' privacy allows them to freely convey their ideas without worrying that their responses could leak.

Justice. Participants were selected without bias from the researcher as they were identified by their local OSCA leaders. Compensation was provided for the loss of time that they have rendered to gather data as well as network data and services to compensate for the load they spent for communication with the researcher.

Transparency. There are no conflicts of interest in this study. Copy of the paper will be made available upon publication observing proper citation to the author. The research is not funded by any private or public entity, and all expenses are from the personal funds of the researcher.

Qualifications of the researcher. The researcher has a master's degree in Guidance and Counseling and has been a guidance counselor for six years and is currently assisting the guidance office for the past five years while finishing his studies to obtain a doctorate in Psychology. This study belongs to gerontology, an area of study that the researcher has completed in his first year of a doctorate in Psychology. Part of the class requirements was to immerse into an institution for older people and develop a program based on the experience from the immersion. The researcher has finished the academic requirement for qualitative research class and attended seminars in the qualitative method and currently receives mentorship from an adviser who has conducted and published several studies with qualitative design.

Adequacy of facilities. The researcher used personal funds and gadgets in writing the study and the gadgets for communicating with the participants were provided by their family members and neighbors. Load was provided for the data connection for online interviews. The researcher utilized the school library's access to online journals to enrich literature references for this study.

Community involvement. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) as well as the Office for Senior Citizens Affair (OSCA) were involved in the provision of participants and were also the beneficiary for the utilization of the results of the study which they may use in developing programs for empty nesters and the elderly in general. Many of the researcher's colleagues may fall into an empty nester's criteria or transition into this phase of their life. Some of them and the parents and guardians who are the school's stakeholders may be pre-empty nesters and will be full empty nesters within months or years. The researcher conducted a dialogue with the DSWD and OSCA about the situation of empty nesters wherein it was agreed to develop more activities and programs that promote interaction and mental health.

Result and Discussion

To capture the essence of the data, the researcher identified an eidetic insight, using Lichtman's (2013) Three C's (Coding, Categories, and Concepts). Six themes emerged from their experiences of isolation which are as follows:

Theme 1: Economic Vulnerability

The first theme shows the struggles related to financial resources. Food provision from family members displays the involvement of the family especially the empty nester's children in providing their basic needs, shortage of resources discusses the lack of basic needs despite the assistance from family, and hesitance to ask for help describes the empty nester's hesitation to demand from their children.

In a traditional Filipino family set up, multiple generations would live in the same house which may mean that there are more people to feed, but there are also more people who contribute to household expenditures. Living in isolation may exempt empty nesters from taking care of other family members and just focus on their own, but at this stage of their life, many of them may have no regular jobs or source of income, no insurance, and might not be ready financially to sustain themselves. For Zhang et al. (2020), living alone can be associated with financial hardship and more frequent medical conditions. Tolentino and Kakihara (2021) shared the data from OECD that 70 years old and above Filipinos are poorer than average poor adults due to lack of pension, retirement, financial abuse, and abandonment. Sanchez (2016) added that limited coverage by the social pension might contribute to the rising incidence of poverty and hunger among older Filipino persons.

Taormina and Gao (2013) clarified that by themselves, things would not be a need per se, but rather, their deficiency affecting a person is what makes it a need. Thus, following Maslow's theory, physiological needs can be defined as the lack of chemicals, nutrients, or internal (e.g., food/health) or environmental (e.g., temperatures) conditions necessary for the body to survive, such that the extended absence of these things could lead to psychological stress or physical death. Since food is a basic need that everyone cannot do without, empty nesters would rely on their children for provisions if their finances are insufficient. Sharifi et al. (2019) considered that there are changes in conditions for people of this age. They may have to be dependent on others to meet their basic needs.

Bougea et al. (2019) suggested that certain societies like Africa, India, the Middle East, and East Asia held older parents in high esteem, and it is considered a child's duty to care for and respect them. In the Philippines, Ogena (2006) found that senior citizens were most likely to receive financial and material support from their children. Cruz et al. (2019) reported that the majority of older people received monetary and material assistance from their children. There is a reversal of roles where the children now provide for the parents who used to be the provider. There are times that empty nesters are hesitant to ask for help, possibly due to the current status of their children, who could also barely make ends meet.

Theme 2: Physical Vulnerability

This theme looks into the physical condition of the empty nesters as sickness is part of aging, medicine needs and persisting ailments looks into how their other needs for survival such as medicine is provided for and the ailments that continue to trouble them, despite or from not getting medical attention.

As people grow older, the chance to acquire disease and chronic ailments gets higher. Health needs add up to basic needs for survival and longevity. Among the basic needs, empty nesters struggle to provide themselves with food every day since they have limited sources of income. Health needs would comprise doctor check-ups, laboratory, and medicine.

Perry et al. (2015) noted that many community-dwelling older adults experience minor declines in physical health and cognition, and having a disability needs to manage aspects of their health to maintain or improve their overall well-being. Furthermore, they reported that for those who are living alone, additional vulnerabilities were experienced. Sanchez (2016) interviewed participants relating to health. They shared that they received support from their families to purchase medicines or vitamins and for their regular medical check-ups, indicating that financial support from family is essential to enable older Filipino persons to have regular medical check-ups. However, Cruz et al. (2019) found that only half of their respondents take medicines. According to Ogena (2006), this may be partly due to the cost of medicine for an older family member to cost more in the Philippines than in other countries like India. Inadequate national health insurance also contributes to challenges in the health of empty nesters. Wu et al. (2022) confirmed that rural empty-nest elderly in Western China might face more challenges in seeking medical services as the inadequacy of national health insurance further posed a great economic challenge for rural empty nest elderly in seeking medical services.

Theme 3: Social Vulnerability

This theme looks into the struggles of empty nesters in terms of interacting socially. Need for connectedness shows their desire to be with their family and need for support is about the difficulty of having no one to assist in their old age.

Human beings are a social species that relies on cooperation to survive and thrive like any other human being, the empty nesters are socially vulnerable given their situation. Far from relatives and most of the loved ones gone, especially their respective husbands, the need for connectedness is an understatement to describe their social longing for love and belongingness.

Absence of interaction as a form of social vulnerability has been brought upon by the unavailability of family and friends to spend time and communicate with the empty nesters as discussed by Chen et al. (2012) that they do need the support from their family members through close contact and frequent visits as these social activities may help them avoid loneliness. Mahilum (2011) believed that Filipino elderly gave premium importance towards social support over economic aspects as it is natural to be connected with significant others to make them feel loved, wanted, and cared for, since there are times that children would only care for them when they are sick.

Sickness, natural disasters, and accidents poses as another concern among empty nesters as they need support and assistance during times of need. Zhang et al. (2019) indicated that empty nesters may have fewer people to rely on as their social networks are mainly composed by family and relatives as well friends. Empty nesters are well aware of this situation and it bothers them that they may have limited people to ask for support and the people that comprise the support network may be limited to extend help as pointed out by Chen et al. (2012) that it is impossible to rely fully and overwhelmingly on the family members because they have their own lives to live and their own children to bring up. Thus, being alone, according to Agimudie (2021) exacerbated the empty nesters' worry and fears as they feel vulnerable and they are concerned for their physical safety.

Thus, empty nesters seek connectedness as it is important according to Xu and Yang (2022) who discussed other studies indicating social contact especially with their children to have critical impact on mental health, weakens perceived stress, enhances well-being, and produces positive affective states.

Theme 4: Emotional Vulnerability

The fourth theme discusses how the empty nesters feel about being alone. Need to vent out shows the difficulty of having no one to talk about their problems, loneliness from estrangement is how they feel that their children are not with them, reminiscence of the past and worries for security are two other subthemes that looks into their emotions of being isolated.

Empty nesters, being generally isolated from others, were riddled with concerns across various aspects such as in health, finances, and social contact. At their age where it is expected for them to be at peace and take a break from solving problems, this may take a toll on their emotional condition. It is important that when such experience arises, it may prompt them to seek emotional release by venting or talking about it. Maurya and Kothali (2020) that venting out may be a stress reliever and part of coping. Furthermore, Agimudie (2021) noted that having no one to talk to in a constant communication may affect the mental health of empty nesters.

In any situation that involves loss, sadness is a normal emotional condition for people in grief. Empty nesters experience losing sustained contact with their children, their family and social roles, and other personal losses; hence, many expressed kasubo or sadness. Fraleigh (2015) noted that other empty nest transition outcomes resulting from role loss include overwhelming grief, sadness, dysphoria, and depression. Kamingaw is another term that has been expressed, which translates to longing and loneliness. The departure of children, according to Wang and Zhao (2011) plays a significant role in feelings of loneliness due to their attachment towards their children. Tolentino and Kakihara (2021) indicated that due to functional limitations and lack of family support, loneliness, and social isolation might be more frequent among older adults.

Tragantzopoulou and Giannouli (2021) found it not surprising that loneliness is associated with isolation due to their transition and decline in the network of social relationships. According to Bougea et al. (2019), empty nesters with low social support, low socio-economic status, divorce, and widowhood as predictors suffer from loneliness, among others (such as physical and mental decline, and less life satisfaction) compared to those who have regular contact with their children. Not only is there loss but being isolated as to living on their own aggravates the emotional turmoil experienced by empty nesters. Agimudie (2021) discussed that being alone empty nesters loneliness was fueled by isolation since there were no children to interact with daily.

Contributing factors to loneliness include situational variables, such as physical isolation, moving to a new location, and divorce or marital separation. Sbarra (2015) stated that the death of someone significant in a person's life can also lead to feelings of loneliness with Liang and Luo (2017) indicating that it is normal for them to reminisce about the past. Thus, there may be instances wherein empty nesters would reminisce about the past that involves people who were close to them.

Theme 5: Coping With Isolation Vulnerabilities

This theme looks into ways empty nesters cope with their isolation. The subthemes are working for productivity and leisure, prayer relieves concerns, getting used to and acceptance, and sustained social support.

It is natural to get oneself busy even after retirement, or for the participants' part, even years after transitioning to an empty nest. Empty nesters have a full day of preparing food, house cleaning, laundry, and economically productive activities. Perry et al. (2015) discussed the development of a mature sense of competence, which is in connection with Eriksonian theory. This theory suggests that despite the challenges older adults experience, such as declines in their physical health and/or cognitive abilities, their renewed sense of purpose may result in self-management to remain autonomous, rather than passively allowing family and others to manage their services and care

for them. Similarly, the renewal of competence indicates that older adults' previous experiences, such as taking care of their children and house, may be transferred to the task of self-management, where they take care of themselves by doing all household chores.

Sanchez (2016) indicated that one of the key concepts of activity theory is physical functioning, which is important for older persons to attain successful aging. This was echoed by Zanjari et al. (2022), stating that the capability of maintaining physical functioning as part of active engagement is part of the model of successful aging. It also espouses stability, which can be established by developing an everyday routine, creating a "safety" net that can be relied on.

One of the reasons that the empty nesters and elderly generally keep engaging in routine and work would be to keep themselves doing what they are already familiar with. For Wang et al. (2021), empty nesters will face various challenges and experiences due to the variations in their activities and mostly would be holding onto existing activities, expressing reluctance to engage in new activities. Even during their solo parent days, they were the ones who were doing household chores, especially when the children were too young then. Daily activities imply active management and sustainability of resources, such as cleaning the house.

Ogena (2006) found that in the Philippines, more than half of the household population were 60 years old and over and were gainfully employed in 2000. Most were working in agriculture (13.77%), and some were laborers and unskilled workers (6%). Furthermore, the data show that when asked how long older persons should work, the majority (89 %) believed that they should continue to work as long as they can.

According to Yao et al. (2019), poverty or economic hardship limits the ability of empty nesters to live independently and meet their social needs or desires since having lower or limited income sources prevents them from interacting with friends or family, limiting their opportunities to increase their satisfaction. Thus, empty nesters engage in economic activities to support themselves and decrease

vulnerability. Cruz et al. (2019) gathered that 7% of those aged 80 and up continue to rely on earnings from work as a source of income. Despite their advanced age, they are mainly engaged in informal work. Some also shared their worries over the economic status of their children that they would want to limit their dependence on them. It is also indicative of reprising the role of being a provider.

Lastly, working does not only provide financial means for empty nesters, but it may also be an opportunity for them to engage socially with their workmates and employers. Sanchez (2016) noted that work opportunities for older persons encourage social engagement, promoting successful aging.

Culturally, Filipinos are inclined to experience spirituality to cope with challenges. According to Badana and Andel (2018), many Filipinos use religion to cope with the daily stresses and strain of life, making it an integral component of many Filipinos' cultural identity. Cruz et al. (2019) reported that a majority of older people attend religious services outside the home, which they consider very important in their lives.

Sanchez (2016) noted that participation in religious activities is central in the daily activities of older Filipino persons, thus identifying religious beliefs as an important factor in overcoming challenges. Empty nesters have revealed involvement in religious activities and continued spiritual endeavors. Adjustment towards being an empty nester includes having more religious life to balance the body and mind (Darmayanthi & Lestari, 2018).

Heightened spirituality is common among the elderly, depending on cultural settings, and the reasons for their engagement may vary. Many elderly join church activities and organizations due to more spare time to socialize. Agimudie (2021) found that religious affiliations foster a sense of comradery and support as they turn to their spiritual community for guidance and support when faced with challenges. However, for the participants of this study, their inclination for spirituality and not just mere religiosity is due to their belief that their faith has been instrumental in alleviating their concerns. Stinson (2013) indicated that older adults facing inevitable late-life challenges such as role changes identified spirituality as a significant source of strength and resiliency, using it as a coping strategy to deal with stress. Thus, personal spirituality and church activities are spiritual activities (e.g., prayer) that can reduce feelings of isolation. The community aspect surrounding spirituality can have positive outcomes for older adults (Malone & Dadswell, 2018). Studies relate spirituality to positive psychological and physical well-being for an older adult" (Stinson, 2013) and "linked to comfort, hope, and peace of mind in relation to ill-health in older age, intertwined with health, well-being, and quality of life (Malone & Dadswell, 2018). Having believed that their prayers were answered, they feel better whenever they engage in spiritual activities, and this shows even their expression of their dreams or aspirations.

These dreams and aspirations, which at times would appear in the empty nesters' prayers, could be an expression of their personal life meaning. Studies have looked into spirituality and life meaning, such as that increased spiritual development is often associated with later stages of adulthood when individuals are likely to explore the greater meaning of their life and existence (Stinson, 2013). In detail, spirituality was explained as a source of strength, comfort, and hope. When facing a difficult or challenging time in their life, some participants drew on their religion, spirituality, and/or belief to help them through and give them the hope that everything would be okay (Malone & Dadswell, 2018).

Bougea et al. (2019) stated that the ways of coping of various cultural groups vary in terms of roles, values, norms, and expectations. Empty nesters have come up with ways to manage their emotional needs.

Being exposed daily to the same worries and concerns, they have gotten used to the situation. For older people, Bland and DeRobertis (2020) quoted Maslow and Mittelmann, emphasizing the ability to constructively adapt to circumstances beyond one's control, to remain sustainably and non-defensively collected in the face of crisis, and to withstand setbacks as opportunities for growth (instead of as threatening). It should also be noted that the authors considered healthy growth and development to

involve the ability to withstand reasonable deprivation. Acceptance could be an indication of wisdom, as argued by Ardelt and Edwards (2016), a basic characteristic of wisdom is acceptance, which is to "give in" and "go with the flow," as well as the ability to find meaning in suffering without submitting to resignation and despair.

The feeling of normalcy and reduction of heightened cognitive, affective, and behavioral stimulation indicates habituation. In a simpler sense, according to Zhang (2019), habituation means that older people are already familiar with the production mode, lifestyle, and communication mode and find their own position in the mechanism of continuous operation. It does not only convey the rational choice of the elderly but also includes the traditional production mode and stable communication mode under the familiar lifestyle. This coping process reduces stress for empty nesters that they either address these concerns with nonchalance or disregard them, as evidenced by others' attitudes towards the non-availability of medicines. Lastly, Hijalda (2018) found that letting go and moving on developed the resiliency of Ilongga mothers with empty nest syndrome.

Another emotional management activity for empty nesters is their engagement with family and neighbors. According to Bujis et al. (2021), social needs are universal, and their fulfillment is considered a key human motivation and prerequisite for happiness. It is also instrumental for survival as Taormina and Gao (2013) stated that satisfying the need for socialization, that is, forming attachments with other individuals or groups, can increase survival as belongingness needs are innate and that the deprivation of satisfying these needs can have negative consequences for the individual. Castillo et al. (2021) specified that older adults long for interactions and conversations and tend to get lonely and socially isolated if social interactions are limited, citing a result in a study conducted that the participants felt they belong and were being kept in sight even just on social media. Tolentino and Kakihara (2021) shared that older adults have a very specific need for love, care, and affection as being able to build and maintain relations and contribute to community life are essential components of healthy aging.

Bujis et al. (2021) declared that, of late, many parents experience the empty nest syndrome, which could result in lower affection levels; thus, providing care to elderly parents is likely to increase levels of affection fulfillment. Xihui and Yixuan (2018) suggested the idea of emotional comfort, which transpires when family members provide emotional care for their parents, such as children returning home to visit their parents and chatting with their parents. Agimudie (2021) detailed the findings on single parents; profound bonds that surpassed the boundaries of parent-child relationships and close relationships with their children are seen as a strength. They found comfort that their children supported them throughout the empty nest transition and would regularly visit or communicate, making them feel that they could depend on their children in times of need which reinforces their close bond.

Wu and Sheng (2020) found that aging adults tend to seek support from their family members. Cruz et al. (2019) shared the findings in their study that older Filipinos are highly involved in various forms of exchange of support with their children. Nearly 84% visited any of their non-co-resident children 12 months before the survey, while 94% were visited by a non-co-resident child. Feelings of sadness were alleviated when they were visited by their family-children, grandchildren, niece, nephew, and siblings. Others would initiate interaction by visiting their families.

When there is a need for socialization and the family is unavailable, they seek out connectedness from other people, most of whom are neighbors. Bujis et al. (2021) discussed that Social Production Function Theory says that the resources used to fulfill social needs can be substituted with another when it is easier for them to fulfill. Turning toward their neighbors indicates that empty nesters seek to establish connectedness with people to whom they have ease of access. This is in consideration of their physical limitations to travel and other limitations such as the use of gadgets or communication technologies which was experienced by the researcher when he had to coordinate with

the participant's family members and neighbors to interview them since they either lack gadgets or they barely know how to use the advanced features. Furthermore, Bujis et al. (2021) suggested that the increased fulfillment of these other needs might yield a relatively stable level of happiness despite the loss of status. Hence, establishing connectedness with non-family members helps empty nesters adapt, as Darmayanthi and Lestari (2018) stated that friends could be a source of positive relationships and support when facing the empty nest phase. This is due to activities that benefit such as getting together with friends, sharing experiences, finding solutions to the problems encountered, visitation, attending important events, and doing physical activity.

Socialization with neighbors provides the additional support empty nesters need, which could be beneficial for them in maintaining their well-being. For Zanjari et al. (2022), social relationships and social support become more necessary since individuals encounter challenges (empty nest syndrome, social isolation, and morbidity) while getting old, making them essential for well-being. In a study conducted by Agimudie (2021), siblings and friends encouraged participants to socialize, which lessened their aloneness and emboldened participants to embrace the positive aspects of an empty nest. Furthermore, the support from family and friends mitigated some of the feelings of loneliness and worry and is helpful when coping with an empty nest (Agimudie, 2021), which is important to their empty nest experience.

Theme 6: Hopeful Aspirations
This concept emphasizes things that empty nesters want for themselves and the desire for positive experiences beyond their current condition. Even when empty nesters have acceptance and contentment with their situation, they still seek things that are mostly focused on improving their conditions in health, finances, and opportunities for their families. The most basic of their aspirations is the alleviation of their current condition, which stems from their desire to survive.

These desires and aspirations may be a cognitive faculty to accommodate struggles and direct oneself in making plans and achieving goals. Plans and goals indicate moving on with the next stages in life. However, the empty nesters' aspirations are not grand, and they are rather simple. They also keep on going around current predicaments, and the desire for a healthy body resulting in a lengthier life span could be indicative of their desire to set things straight.

It is part of a normally functioning individual to have hopes for the future or to aspire for a better situation. Castillo et al. (2021) noted in their study that the older people remained grateful, appreciative, and full of hope despite the difficulties and struggles of being in isolation as they focused on the brighter side of life. The empty nesters' aspirations were indicative of their reflection on their life course, looking into the past as they try to resolve the present. According to Higuchi (2018), it is important for those aged 65 and over to achieve the virtue of wisdom and to reflect on life. Erikson's theory on psychosocial development explains that older adults revisit the crisis of initiative versus guilt but may achieve a renewed sense of purpose by engaging in productive activities that maintain their health (Perry et al., 2015). Their aspirations were expressions of desire for survival, improvement, and finding resolve in their struggles. However, this is not entirely selfish. As Bulloch (2021) said, aspirations might be cross-generational as parents work to give better lives to their children. A study by Australian Unity (2019) stated that having a sense of meaning and purpose also forms one of three critical components of the 'golden triangle of happiness.' These three aspects of the triangle include personal relationships, financial control, and a sense of purpose which emerged as key factors influencing well-being from 15 years of data from 60,000 participants completing the Australian Unity Well-being Index.

Many of these aspirations were of longevity, most likely the empty nesters' desire to put things in place, correct, and contribute to their family before their death. According to Cruz et al. (2019), these meaningful activities are referred to as generativity, seeking to make other

things better for the next generation. Generativity underscores the importance of relationships between different generations. Sanchez (2016) shared that in a study in Hongkong, the elderly were people concerned about the welfare of their children and grandchildren, especially their physical and mental health, education, and financial situation. This is supported by Cruz et al. (2019) that awareness of one's mortality that comes with age prompts individuals to be selective of how they invest their time and resources, focusing on those that have greater meaning and purpose in their lives, in which such dynamics underscore the salience of generativity. The empty nesters' aspirations were not purely self-centered, and they led toward people who matter to them. In this way, the empty nesters' personal meaning surfaces as they are motivated to concentrate their actions on reshaping their lives and those of their families. The existence of meaning in their life enables people to survive and transcend their experiences. However, it not only serves as a way to cope with difficulties, but it motivates oneself to act with positivity towards the future.

The Essence of Experience: Surviving Vulnerabilities of Isolation Among Widowed Empty Nesters

The essence of the empty nesters' experience of isolation hinges on the idea that they were able to survive the vulnerabilities that arose from their isolation.

Empty nesters may experience many vulnerabilities such as shortage in finances, food, and interaction opportunities but they were able to develop coping strategies to manage these vulnerabilities and continue to be resilient after their children left their home.

It attempts to capture the idea that despite changes in roles, circumstances, and relations, empty nesters were able to make sense of their experience of being isolated and alone. There may be struggles in everyday living, yet they were able to come up with coping mechanisms, and these were unique to them in such a way that they have escalated versions like seeking connectedness and practicing spirituality, and its polar opposite of getting used to things and acceptance.

Being an isolated empty nester does not mean that isolation is full and complete because they are still capable of changing the narratives of their lives.

Synthesis

In summary, empty nesters who live in isolation depict a story of survivorship despite relentless barrage of challenges coming from various aspects in life. Prior to being an empty nester, each one of the participants had been both parents to their children and has been the family's provider.

As empty nesters, they faced financial, health, and social related challenges. Growing old, there is a tendency to live separate from other family members which leads to deficiencies in finances, social support, and connectedness. These conditions escalate the vulnerable situation that the empty nesters are exposed to.

To deal with these vulnerabilities, empty nesters developed coping strategies they engage in economic related activities since they are responsible for themselves. Work has not only contributed to their finances but has also provided opportunities to interact with others. Despite the feelings of loneliness, they were able to seek out meaningful interactions with their family and neighbors. Thus, instead of succumbing, they found ways to cope with them. Their resilience to overcome the vulnerabilities were motivated by the need for connectedness with family, friends or neighbors who comprises their meaningful experiences.

Struggles are ordinary in the life of an empty nester that has rendered them vulnerable. Their ways of coping contributes to their resilience in managing these vulnerabilities and it is motivated by the people around them and the fulfillment they derive from these interactions. Furthermore, the aspirations of empty nesters are for preservation of oneself and others that matter to them. It signifies the optimism for change to continue living their lives for themselves and others. Their optimistic behavior is about looking into the future and working towards the realization of these aspirations. Thus, the empty nesters' experience of isolation made them realize that they have to survive and continue on living not only for themselves but also for their family.
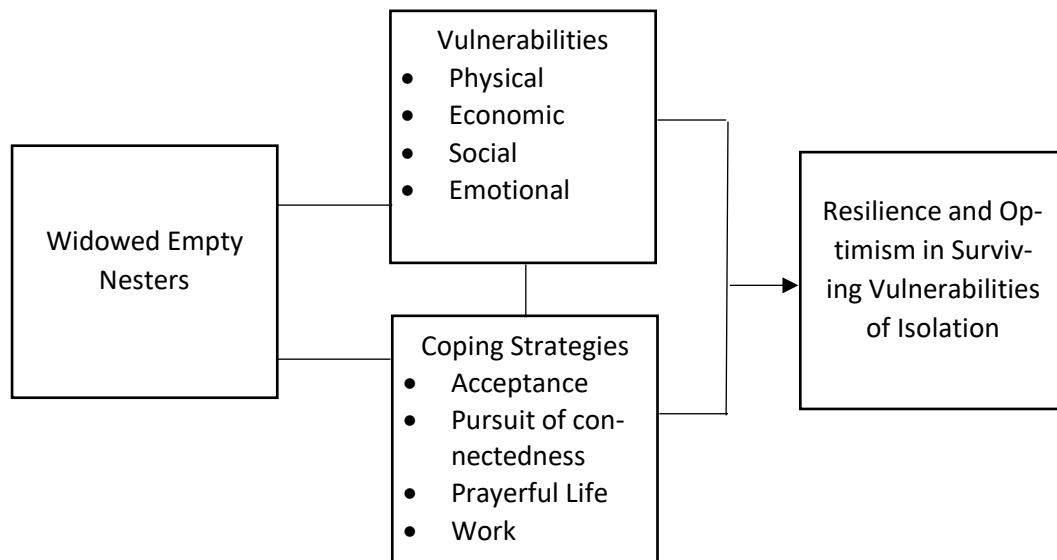
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                    ┌─────────────────────┐
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                    │   • Prayerful Life  │
                    │   • Work            │
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Figure 2. A Conceptual Model on Surviving Vulnerabilities for Widowed Empty Nesters

Summary and Conclusion

There were six themes that emerged based on the experiences of isolation of empty nesters. These are economically vulnerable, physically vulnerable, socially vulnerable, emotionally vulnerable, coping with isolation vulnerabilities, and hopeful aspirations. Essentially, despite varied vulnerabilities that causes hardships for the empty nesters, they were able to survive by being able to developing a wide ranging set of coping strategies and keeping a hopeful perspective towards the future.

Being in isolation brings many challenges. Despite loss and separation from loved ones and living alone with inadequate sustenance, meager earnings, undesirable situations, not to mention loneliness and fear at night and during storms that may blow their houses away, empty nesters fastened their grip to no less than their remaining strength, their nearby social support, the self, and divine providence.

No one can ever imagine what lies ahead because life has no guarantee; it only has promises. The empty nesters lived to learn one step at a time as the narrative explored different experiences among them. It came out that their will to live flourished despite many discouragements in the twilight of their physical vigor, in a final journey.

To an empty nester, vulnerability is not the word to best describe the experiences of participants but rather it is about survival. At the end of the day, despite looming loneliness and weariness while living alone, empty nesters are determined to overcome these and look towards the future. With all the circumstances they inevitably situated themselves in, their aspirations forged in peculiar ordeals made them survive and hold on.

The results cannot be generalized given the sparse quantity of participants rather it provides a rich understanding of isolation experiences of empty nesters. Data gathering has also posed limitations in observation of nonverbal communication cues of the participants as it was conducted through videocall, thus, the researcher has only been able to take note of tone and intensity of their delivery. The study focused on a certain group of people on a specific demographic level. Though the majority of the elderly are economically challenged, it has overlooked those who belong to different socio-economic statuses. The study has also focused on female empty nesters and has not covered the experiences of their male counterparts. Since this study is qualitative, it has not covered the degree of isolation, loss and loneliness of empty nesters.

The result of the study exposes various vulnerabilities that contribute to challenges encountered by empty nesters. Since the results are limited from generalizing the entire senior citizen population, it could be noted that the resiliency to survive challenging situations

promote a holistic approach for aging and positive psychology as results provided varied sources for coping which ranges from both the internal and external sources. Survival elements of connectedness and transcending difficult situations affirms the practicality of promoting life meaning especially during difficult situations. The practicality of social welfare provisions towards security among the aging sector may be reviewed for possible revisions and enhancement of social benefits such as pension schemes that could provide more stability to its recipients and offer other services aside from financial like promotion of physical and mental health. Mental health practitioners and advocates may refer to the results for basis on the psychological dynamics of the elderly with regard to issues of isolation, loneliness, abandonment, and social exclusion and may use these in selecting counseling and therapy approaches and design a treatment plan that is best suited to the client's needs.

Given the limitations of this study, future directions may be taken to augment them. It would be promising to explore the experiences of empty nesters from other socio-economic categories like retired professional or businessman empty nesters and male empty nesters. Conducting a mixed-method study would improve generating a broad range of data.

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