



Understanding Marital Longevity: A Qualitative Study of Long-Term Marriage

Abstract: This study examines the lived experiences of long-married couples in Southern Cebu, Philippines those who have been together for more than thirty years. It focuses on the elements that help sustain enduring relationships. Drawing on Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and the Socio-Ecological Model, the study employs a qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach to illuminate the emotional, relational, and contextual aspects that are often overlooked in existing literature. Through in-depth interviews with ten thriving couples, the study found that family milestones such as anniversaries or children's achievements tend to strengthen emotional closeness. At the same time, challenges such as financial struggles, family conflicts, and experiences of loss have helped couples develop resilience and a sense of shared growth. The study found that lasting marriages grow from simple yet steady practices talking openly, showing respect, holding on to shared beliefs, and keeping faith at the center of the relationship. As the years pass, couples who learn to read each other's emotions and work toward the same goals often grow even closer. The stories gathered in *Roots and Rings: Tales of Decades Love* offer lessons that counselors, family groups, and young couples may find helpful as they build their own lasting unions.

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1. Introduction

Maintaining a strong and united marriage is never easy. Many couples face disagreements that sometimes end in separation or divorce. Even long-term marriages do not always bring happiness to both partners, and some people choose to stay in complex relationships for

various personal or family reasons. To truly thrive in marriage goes beyond simply staying together or feeling satisfied it means growing as individuals and as partners, finding meaning in shared experiences, and building resilience over time.

Still, many couples manage to sustain their relationship and experience joy through the years, even though conflict is a natural part of married life. The way couples handle their disagreements usually shapes how long their relationship lasts. When they manage to listen, discuss their issues, and choose to forgive, they are more likely to maintain the trust and peace they have built together (Herlambang, 2024). For many married people, staying together is not only about love. It also stems from the desire for their children to grow up in a happy home, from the habit of sharing everyday duties, and from the belief that marriage is a promise worth keeping. Some stay out of habit, from sharing everyday chores, or because they truly believe marriage is a promise worth keeping. It also stems from the desire for their children to grow up in a happy home, from the habit of sharing everyday duties, and from the belief that marriage is a promise worth keeping. Some choose to remain because they



wish to raise their children in a joyful and stable home, share the daily work of life, or stay true to what they see as a sacred vow. Others draw strength from family ties and friends who support them through difficult times, or from a personal sense of duty and faithfulness to their partner (Wallerstein, 2019).

Family life, in general, is shaped by traditions and values that give meaning to marriage and guide couples in their daily interactions. A survey by Ipsos MORI revealed that 83% of people aged fifty and above believed that maintaining good relationships with family and friends was the most important aspect of a happy retirement (Harries & Casas, 2013, as cited in Chonody, 2019). Around the world, the crude divorce rate was estimated at about 1.6 in 2022, based on data from fifty-six countries. One major reason behind divorce, as noted by Zaheer (2024), is the weakening sense of commitment between partners.

While marital stability and satisfaction have been extensively examined, the concept of thriving necessitates a more profound investigation into the ways couples prosper over time. In the Philippines, marriage is viewed as sacred and enduring bond with processing moral and cultural significance. Divorce is still against the law, and marriage is still the best way to join two people (Lauser, 2008). However, social changes have put this traditional framework to the test, as evidenced by the decline in marriage rates and the rise of cohabitation and premarital relationships (Canta, 2024).

Despite the Philippines' strong family-oriented values and conservative laws restricting divorce, abortion, and reproductive autonomy (Jocson, 2020; Medina, 2015; Morillo et al., 2013; Kuang, 2025), cohabitation and non-marital childbearing have become increasingly common. More than half of first births now occur outside of marriage, primarily among

couples who live together (Kuang et al., 2017, 2019). Despite this, numerous couples who marry maintain enduring relationships, demonstrating resilience in the face of relational, economic, and emotional adversities. Prior research has shown that among aging couples, mutual respect, conflict resolution, and shared life goals underpin marital longevity (Levenson et al., 1993; Mukashema, 2021). Older couples also tend to regulate their emotions effectively and prioritize positivity over conflict (Carstensen et al., 1995; Verstaen, 2020). In long-term unions, happiness often derives from moral values and fulfilling interpersonal interactions (Mehr & Mohammadi, 2017).

Existing scholars, however, provide a limited understanding of how external factors such as economic change, cultural expectations, and evolving social norms affect the emotional and relational dynamics of long-term marriages (Ingram, 2010; Gurung et al., 2023). This disparity is especially pronounced in the Philippines, where familism significantly shapes both individual and collective behavior (Medina, 2001; Miralao, 1994; Jocson, 2020). Hence, this study examines the lived experiences of elderly married couples in Southern Cebu to explore how love is experienced, maintained, and transformed over the years. Guided by transcendental phenomenology, Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, and the Socio-Ecological Model, the research investigates how aging couples sustain thriving marriages despite shifting sociocultural landscapes.

The purpose of this study is to illuminate the factors that contribute to marital endurance among elderly couples and to provide an in-depth understanding of how love evolves within lifelong partnerships. Through semi-structured interviews with ten long-married couples, the study aims to generate insights that enrich theoretical perspectives on



love and resilience in later life. Furthermore, the findings seek to inform marriage counseling practices, community-based interventions, and future research on relational stability in aging populations, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on marital longevity in culturally conservative contexts.

2. Review of related Literature

In the Philippine context, marriage is culturally, spiritually, and communally anchored in commitment, family unity, and moral responsibility. It is not viewed simply as a legal or emotional union, but rather as a covenant that involves not just the married couple but also their families and community. This collectively instills the meaning of marriage, through which Filipino couples define love, overcome adversities, and maintain long-term stability. In the context of marriage, for instance, Dessen and Braz (2000) defined it as the central factor in family life, thus impacting the overall health and quality of the Filipino family. The same bond in a Philippine setting is accompanied by specific cultural values, such as pakikisama or harmony in relationships, utang na loob or debt of gratitude, and hiya, a sense of propriety and respect. These concepts in a Filipino setting encourage married couples to maintain family dignity at all costs, avoid conflict whenever possible, and uphold their marital vows even in the most challenging times.

According to Wallerstein (2019) and Asadi et al. (2020), many couples choose to stay together not only because of love but also due to shared commitments to social expectations, family stability, and the well-being of their children. In the Philippines, marriage is often seen as a lifelong journey that must endure challenges, which is why divorce remains uncommon and is still viewed with social disapproval. In the Philippines, marriage is often viewed as a lifelong commitment that

must weather all sorts of challenges. That is why divorce is not common and still carries a small amount of social stigma. Additionally, Filipino couples really emphasize spirituality and faith in their relationships. Christian and Catholic teachings especially the vow of “till death do us part” deeply influence how couples cope with difficulties and make important decisions in their relationships. Many participants in this study described God as the foundation of their marriage, often turning to prayer and church activities for guidance and strength. Supporting this, Mahoney and Pargament (2020) found that shared faith helps couples find meaning in their struggles, encourages forgiveness, and strengthens their sense of commitment and resilience.

In the Filipino cultural framework of marriage, gender roles are significant, with traditional husbands seen as providers and wives as nurturing moral anchors. However, with changing social norms, a shift is observed among Filipino couples toward partnership-based roles that emphasize mutual decision-making and emotional support. Respect, fidelity, and family honor remain common ideals. In fact, a recent study among married couples in Southern Cebu demonstrates that marriages are perceived as being a sacred obligation. Marriage proves to be strong in surmounting such difficulties as economic adversity and personal differences by reinforcing values of pagpapakatao, or humanness, and pagmamahalan, or enduring love. On the whole, Filipino ideas of marriage link love with social tranquility, duty, and spirituality, characterizing it as a moral commitment to permanence, faith, and determination, one that elevates it beyond romantic unions and maintains familial and spiritual integrity.

On the other hand, commitment is truly key to maintaining a strong and lasting marriage. As the study shows, it serves as a



motivational and emotional anchor, helping couples navigate tough times and stay united over the years. Karimi (2019) points out that commitment, together with intimacy, is a major pillar of marriage, it keeps things steady during rough patches and boosts overall happiness in the relationship. This aligns well with Sternberg's (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, which posits that commitment is one of the three key components of lasting love, alongside intimacy and passion. While those other two can come and go, commitment is the steady force that holds couples together as they grow older.

Hoesnl et al. (2012) also highlight that in long-term and urban marriages, commitment and emotional closeness tend to trump passion, suggesting a more mature approach to love that emphasizes consistency and feeling secure. Similarly, Walerstein (2019) views commitment as a significant factor in achieving lasting happiness in marriage, noting that couples who actively remind themselves of their loyalty and shared goals are significantly more resilient and adaptable. The research also emphasizes that commitment fosters stronger marriages through a deeper understanding and shared values. According to the study's interviews, couples often mentioned that commitment was what helped them overcome personal issues and external struggles. One person from Santander put it like this: "Understanding each other gave us a solid base for our relationship, and that's what kept our commitment strong." This real-life scenario aligns with Thompson and Lee's (2020) findings, which suggest that a stronger commitment directly leads to greater satisfaction and stability in the long run.

In addition to that, adapting to life's ups and downs is crucial for maintaining a solid marriage, especially when they have been married for a long time or are entering the later years of marriage. Things like retirement, the kids leaving home, financial struggles, health

concerns, or losing someone they love all require some serious emotional resilience and flexibility from both. The way they roll with these punches as a team is what keeps things strong and going. Davis et al. (2020) suggest that when couples adjust their relationship dynamics, they can maintain emotional closeness and stability, even after significant life changes, such as the transition to an empty nest. Those who face it together are way better at maintaining respect, having real talks, and keeping that safe feeling alive. Moreover, Antonucci, Ajrouch, and Birditt (2014) note that as individuals age, shared memories and coping strategies make it easier to handle role changes and new responsibilities without undue drama.

Levenson, Carstensen, and Gottman (1993) found that long-term partners tend to experience fewer conflicts and show greater emotional regulation as they adapt to changing life circumstances. This adjustment process often involves a transformation from passionate love to compassionate and enduring love, where understanding and acceptance replace idealism and conflict. Carstensen, Gottman, and Levenson (1995) also observed that older couples tend to emphasize positivity, empathy, and patience, which helps them sustain intimacy and harmony over time. In the present study, participants demonstrated adaptive behaviors in various life transitions. For instance, couples who faced long separations due to employment, illness, or financial hardship were able to reunite and strengthen their bonds through trust, effective communication, and shared faith. These real-life experiences align with the findings of Khojasteh and Mohammadi (2017), who suggest that moral values, mutual support, and the capacity to learn from past challenges are crucial in helping couples navigate life changes together.



Adaptation also encompasses emotional growth and maturity. As one participant commented, knowing prior conflicts allowed them to go forward with compassion and patience an insight corroborated by Aldao and Nolen-Hoeksema (2020), who emphasize the role of emotional reflection in fostering resilience and self-awareness. Moreover, the study's combination of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and Bronfenbrenner's Socio-Ecological Model demonstrates how both internal commitment and exterior social support systems contribute to successful adaptation during life transitions.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to illuminate the factors that contribute to marital endurance among elderly couples and to provide an in-depth understanding of how love evolves within lifelong partnerships. Through semi-structured interviews with ten long-married couples, the study aims to generate insights that enrich theoretical perspectives on love and resilience in later life. Furthermore, the findings seek to inform marriage counseling practices, community-based interventions, and future research on relational stability in aging populations, thereby contributing to the broader discourse on marital longevity in culturally conservative context.

4. Data and Methods

Research Design: This study examined the experiences of elderly couples who had been married for over thirty years, employing a transcendental phenomenological approach. Following Moustakas' (1994) framework, the researchers tried to set aside their own assumptions and biases a process called *epoché* so they could focus entirely on what the couples themselves were saying. The researchers wanted to really hear what the couples were saying, without adding their own interpretations. Listening to the participants in this way provided a clearer picture of how love,

commitment, and resilience endured over the years. It also showed how the couples themselves understood and made sense of their long life together.

Participants: The study initially recruited twelve elderly married couples from the municipalities of Argao, Dalaguete, Alcoy, Oslob, Boljoon, Santander, and Samboan in southern Cebu, Philippines. These municipalities were purposely selected because they are characterized by strong family networks, deeply rooted cultural traditions, and predominantly rural to semi-rural ways of life, providing a meaningful sociocultural context for examining marital longevity. During data collection and analysis, data saturation was achieved after ten couples, as no new themes or significant insights emerged from the subsequent interviews. In line with phenomenological research standards, the final sample was therefore limited to ten couples to ensure depth rather than breadth of analysis. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The researchers initially identified couples who met the inclusion criteria and then relied on participant referrals to reach other eligible couples. In addition, social media postings were utilized to broaden recruitment and reach couples who may have been difficult to contact through personal networks alone. To be included in the study, couples had to be legally married for at least thirty years. Couples who had cohabited for a similar duration but were not legally married were excluded to maintain consistency and focus on legally recognized marital unions.

All participants resided in rural or semi-rural areas of southern Cebu. As such, the findings primarily reflect the lived experiences of long-term marriages within these settings. The perspectives of urban couples and those from more diverse socioeconomic backgrounds were not represented, which is acknowledged as a

Table 1. Demographic Profile of the Participants (N = 10 Couples)

Participants	Age Range (Years)	Years Married	Highest Educational Attainment	Primary Occupation (Prior to Retirement)	Number of Children
Argao 1	62-65	41 years	College graduate	P1-Purchasing officer P2-Government employee, Division Manager	4
Argao 2	68-69	45 years	N/A	Both sari-sari store vendor	2
Samboan	75	56 years	High school Level	Both farmers	5
Oslob 1	73-75	39 years	College Graduate	P1-Housewife P2-Army	5
Oslob 2	64-67	36 years	Elementary Level	P1-Sweeper P2-Construction worker	8
Alcoy 1	74-76	53 years	Elementary Level	P1-Snack vendor P2-PMSC worker	4
Alcoy 2	73-81	55 years	Elementary Level	P1-Housewife P2-PMSC driver	8
Boljoon	51-59	34	Elementary Level	P1-Housewife P2-Fisherman	8
Santander	60-61	41 years	Elementary Level	P1-Housewife P2-Fisherman	7
Dalaguete	68-69	46 years	Elementary Level	P1- Housewife P2- Chief cook	5

limitation of the study and suggests an important direction for future research.

Interviews were conducted jointly with both spouses present, reflecting the shared and relational nature of marital experiences. For analytic clarity, participants were labeled as P1 (wife) and P2 (husband) in all transcripts and reports. While joint interviews allowed couples to co-construct narratives of their marital journey, this approach may have limited the disclosure of sensitive issues, particularly marital conflicts, or complaints, especially within the context of traditional patriarchal

norms. This is recognized as a methodological limitation of the study.

A demographic profile of the participants including age ranges, years of marriage, educational attainment, occupations, and number of children was compiled and is presented in a separate table to provide contextual grounding for the findings and enhance transparency and transferability.



Data Gathering

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. These interviews were reviewed and validated by an expert panel and were conducted in Cebuano, which allowed participants to speak comfortably and openly. The conversations were guided by three broad, open-ended questions that focused on marital successes, challenges, and coping strategies. Follow-up questions were asked when clarification or further detail was needed. This approach encouraged participants to share their stories in full, providing the researchers with a rich understanding of their experiences. Each interview lasted between twenty minutes and one hour. With participants' consent, the sessions were audio-recorded and supplemented with field notes. A brief demographic survey was also completed to gather information on age, education, occupation, marital duration, and number of children.

Following ethical guidelines, participants signed consent forms and were informed about the study's purpose, scope, and any potential risks or benefits. They were assured that participation was voluntary, that their information would remain confidential, and that they could withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect their identities.

Data Analysis

The interview data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological method, which involved a systematic process of transcription, coding, and thematic clustering. The researchers began by listening repeatedly to the recordings and transcribing them verbatim to achieve familiarity with the narratives. Significant statements were identified and clustered into categories; overlapping or redundant statements were eliminated, and the remaining clusters were synthesized into broader themes. Through

discussions and consensus, these themes were refined to capture the essence of participants' shared experiences. This process allowed the researchers to uncover the underlying meanings of endurance, love, and commitment, while ensuring that the findings remained faithful to the participants' own expressions.

Ethical Consideration

To ensure reliability and validity, the study adhered to Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria for trustworthiness. Credibility was achieved through member checking, wherein participants reviewed transcripts and confirmed the accuracy of the interpretations. Dependability was strengthened by maintaining an audit trail that documented coding decisions and analytic steps, thereby enhancing transparency and consistency. Transferability was supported by providing thick descriptions of participants' demographic and cultural contexts, allowing readers to assess the applicability of findings in similar settings. Finally, confirmability was established through triangulation, reflexive journaling, and peer debriefing, all of which minimized researcher bias and ensured that the data interpretation reflected the respondents' voices rather than the researchers' assumptions.

Nevertheless, the study was subject to several limitations. Because the participants were drawn only from selected municipalities in Southern Cebu, the findings may not apply to other regions or cultural contexts. Furthermore, the reliance on self-reported narratives introduced the possibility of recall bias and social desirability, particularly in sensitive areas such as marital conflict or financial hardship. The study also excluded perspectives from separated or divorced individuals, which limited the scope to couples who managed to sustain their marriages. Finally, as a qualitative study, the findings provided in-depth insights but could not be generalized statistically. Despite these limitations, the research offered



valuable contributions by highlighting the complexity of long-term marital relationships and the cultural values that support their endurance.

5. Results and Discussion

The preceding study aimed to explore the achievements and challenges of elderly married couples who had been together for over three decades. From the interviews, three significant themes emerged: Family Milestones, Reunification and Commitment, and Resilience and Growth. These themes illustrate not only the pleasant aspects of married life but also the challenges that hampered and ultimately strengthened the couple's relationship. In aggregate, they emphasize that longevity in marriage is based not on the absence of crises, but on the persistent pursuit of unity, patience, and a shared purpose.

Table 2.1: Triumphs in the Relationship

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Family Milestones	• Celebrations of special occasions • Successful Children
Reunification and Commitment	• Reuniting after separation • Commitment to marital unity despite life's adversities
Resilience and Growth	• Realization of life lessons from past experiences • Strengthening Bonds Through Shared Hardships

- Collective support and emotional understanding in the relationship

1. Family Milestone

Family milestones come in many forms. From the interviews, couples shared that simple celebrations like birthdays, anniversaries, and Mother's or Father's Day along with their children's successes, were moments they truly cherished. These occasions reminded them of how far they had come together and gave them the strength to keep going, especially during difficult times. As noted by Sarah et al. (2018), a family milestone represents a significant achievement in a family's journey, such as getting married, living together as spouses, or raising children.

"Special occasions like birthdays and anniversaries... those are the joys of our lives together. We even roasted a carabao for our 50th anniversary and renewed our vows for the third time." (P1, Argao)

Family milestones are more than just celebrations; they reflect long-standing traditions and the love couples have built over the years. In Filipino households, these gatherings often extend beyond the couple and their children to include relatives, close friends, and sometimes neighbors who have been part of their lives. Such occasions are filled with warmth and connection, serving as important markers of a couple's shared journey and enduring bond. Sometimes the celebration is simple sharing a meal, cooking something special, or singing together at home. At other times, it becomes a big event, complete with laughter, stories, and food for everyone. Whatever the case, these occasions remind the couple of how far they've come. When they



celebrate their anniversaries or renew their vows, it's not just for show; it's a heartfelt way of saying, "we made it through together," despite the ups and downs of married life. According to Sarah et al. (2018), anniversaries serve as powerful affirmations of a family's growth, strengthening emotional bonds while also gaining social recognition for a marriage that has stood the test of time.

Alongside these joyful celebrations, many couples spoke about their children's successes as some of their greatest achievements in marriage. Parents described the pride and happiness they felt when seeing their children graduate, secure stable employment, and establish their own families. One husband expressed:

"God rewarded us for the hardships we went through. Our children also became successful, except for one he could have been a seaman too, but he got married early and is now a tricycle driver" (P2, Alcoy)

Having a successful child who finished studies and landed a good job was seen as a triumph in their marriage. Despite the poverty and struggles they encountered, just by seeing their child being able to enjoy the life that they had not had before, they felt a sense of pleasure and contentment. The aforementioned statement implies optimism, while also acknowledging that not all intentions were fulfilled. Nevertheless, children's achievements were viewed as evidence of heavenly blessing and the reward of conjugal perseverance. In a culture that promotes familism, children's victories are valued as shared triumphs that reaffirm parental sacrifice. As Contreras et al. (2020) pointed out, parental satisfaction particularly the perception of having produced outstanding children is a cornerstone of marital prosperity in family-centered societies.

Accordingly, family milestones can take diverse forms. Whether it is transmitted

through symbolic events or children's feats, this is established as an anchor of gratification and profit. Such milestones that the couples achieved reinforced unity, not only their capacity to withstand sacrifice for the well-being of future generations.

2. Reunification and Commitment

Another triumph revealed was the theme of reunification and commitment, particularly among couples who had endured long separations due to work or migration. For example, one wife shared:

"We separated before, then he came back. He left me for ten years, and then he returned." (P1, Oslob)

The distance between couples can be both challenging and a test of a relationship. Considering the time period in which they lived, the 1990s, the wife confirmed that although they do not have constant communication, they remain faithful to one another. Their children can attest to it, as both of them brought a child with them. This signifies the power of being committed to one another, despite the hundred miles that separate the couple.

After a decade of separation and incongruous communication, being reunited was seen as a triumph that affirmed loyalty and perseverance. Similar anecdotes indicate that marital devotion may endure external circumstances, based on shared principles. In addition, Leavitt et al. (2023) similarly verified that cultural values rooted in fidelity and intimacy commonly preserve marriages even during extended separations.

Moreover, faith and spirituality evolved as crucial components of commitment. A husband's appraisal demonstrates this reliance:

"Your faith in God is so shallow. Trust in the Lord, because all trials will eventually pass. Trust in God



He will help you through whatever hardship you go through" (P2, Santander)

This outlook suggests that resilience was not only built on human stubbornness but also on religious commitment. For several couples, enduring separation or adversity was seen as a test of faith. The work of Mahoney and Pargament (2020) highlights that prevalent spiritual practices such as prayer, church involvement, and reliance on divine providence enhance marital resilience and create a shared framework for interpreting adversity. In this way, commitment was perpetuated, albeit also through devotion to one another and fidelity to God.

3. Resilience and Growth

The third theme, resilience and growth, demonstrated how struggles were reframed as opportunities for strengthening the marital bond. Couples acknowledged that difficulties such as poverty, conflict, and illness tested their patience but also nurtured emotional maturity. One wife shared:

"Now he's the one trying to reconcile and unite with me. Before it was just me making the effort; now we actually talk... I'm doing my best now just for him" (P1, Oslob 2)

Her testimony portrays the transition from a unilateral to a collaborative approach in maintaining the relationship. Over time, couples developed a sense of reciprocity, empathy, and shared responsibility that went beyond. This transition aligns with Aldao and Nolen-Hoeksema (2020), who noted that self-reflection and emotional regulation enable partners to make more informed decisions in conflict situations, thereby strengthening interpersonal dynamics.

Forgiveness was another cornerstone of resilience. As one participant explained:

"What's really important for a married couple, when trials come, is humility, patience, and forgiveness." (P1, Argao 2)

This assertion highlights that resilience is not limited to avoiding confrontation but also involves cultivating the characteristics essential for survival and reconciliation. The study by Johnson and Lee (2021) found that couples who overcome hardships together often develop deeper trust and closeness. In this manner, forgiving acts as both a coping technique and a reaffirmation of marital commitment.

Mutual support further enabled resilience, as described by one participant:

"When he was struggling, I was the one who gave him encouragement, and when I needed help, he was the one who helped me." (P1, Argao 2)

Similar reciprocity underscores the importance of emotional support in fostering a safe environment for vulnerability. Garcia et al. (2022) pointed out that emotional support is a crucial predictor of marital endurance, as it enables couples to tackle adversities with a sense of partnership rather than isolation.

Altogether, these aspects shape their marriage over time. Those joyous memories enable them to remain together to this day. However, not all marriages lie on the bed of roses, since together with them are the thorns that they need to withstand and conquer. Some struggles lead to separation, while others are seen as a key component in pursuing a relationship.

Table 2.2: Struggles in the Relationship

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Financial Difficulties	• Money issues • Poverty and debt • Financial struggles

	• Medical maintenance
Family Conflicts	• Conflict regarding children • Interpersonal Arguments and Discrepancies • Past abuse and separation • Infidelity
Unforeseen Occurrence	• Loss of children • Difficult living conditions

The narratives of elderly married couples revealed that long-term unions are not without their share of pain. On the contrary, they are often marked by deep and recurring struggles that test patience, loyalty, and endurance. Analysis of the interviews uncovered three significant difficulty themes: Financial Difficulties, Family Conflicts, and Unforeseen Occurrences. These struggles were not isolated but interconnected, influencing one another and shaping the overall quality of marital life.

1. Financial Difficulties

An estimated 27% of Filipinos live below the country's poverty line and are mostly employed in the service, industrial, and agricultural sectors. Traditionally, men have provided most of the home's income, with wives allocating it for domestic expenses. It also implies that spouses usually have differing perspectives regarding how money should be spent, even though wives typically oversee the family's financial decisions (Ashraf, 2009; Ruedas, 2023). This economic turmoil

exacerbates a dilemma within the family that may further impact the children.

"The children cry because they want something, and we don't have money to give them. That is one of the financial struggles" (P1, Boljoon)

Being in poverty is not solely a struggle of a parent, but also it is shared by their children who are facing it. The participant's sentiment captures the emotional toll of poverty not merely an economic condition, but a source of guilt and helplessness for parents unable to meet their children's needs.

Similarly, another wife shared:

"I try to feed the children even if it means we eat porridge most of the time, and only occasionally get to eat meat." (P1, Oslob 2)

This response illustrates how financial deprivation compelled families to adjust even their dietary habits, prioritizing survival over comfort. Being impoverished frequently led to debt and erratic income, as many couples relied on farming, fishing, or irregular jobs. The conditions mentioned above coincide with the findings of Kim et al. (2020) and Richardson et al. (2019), who revealed that financial stress triggers a ripple effect, increasing anxiety, enhancing marital tension, and negatively impacting family well-being.

Moreover, aging posed another layer of financial challenges through medical upkeep. As another individual explained:

"At an older age, there is also the struggle of maintaining medications managing hypertension and other conditions." (P1, Argao 2)

This clarifies the cumulative effect of poverty and deteriorating health. As couples aged, their limited capacity to meet healthcare needs became a source of strain and vulnerability. The World Health Organization (2019) similarly noted that older populations in low-resource countries are disproportionately affected by out-of-pocket medical expenses,



which can exhaust already limited family resources.

Hence, financial constraints were not solely an economic issue but rather a sense of guilt and a test in marriage, altering everyday interactions and testing the resilience of couples.

2. Family Conflicts

Alongside financial difficulty, couples frequently encountered familial disputes. These involved debates over child-rearing, interpersonal arguments, prior abuse, and even infidelity. Taking on parental obligations often became a catalyst for stress, as evidenced by one couple who resorted to entertaining yet desperate ways to manage childcare:

"We play 'jack 'n poy' (rock-paper-scissors) to decide who will be absent to take care of the child" (P1, Argao 2)

It seems to be lighthearted to hear, but it also underscores the dilemma of balancing work and parenting without neglecting each other's responsibilities. Considering that Filipinos are known for being a close-knit family, the respondent further stated that "it is different if the parents will take care of the children."

On the other hand, unresolved issues from the past also give rise to conflicts, such as past abuses. One wife openly admitted:

"Before, he used to hit me when he was drunk. That went on until around 2021." (P1, Oslob 2)

This upsetting experience shows that violence in marriage can last for decades, leaving both physical and emotional scars. Some couples were able to navigate these kinds of circumstances; nevertheless, they remained a part of their marriage stories.

The act of cheating was an additional offense that caused tremendous harm. One participant said:

"He had an affair before... He brought the woman to a hotel. I almost really left him before, if it weren't for our children" (P1, Dalaguete)

This testimony illustrates the tension between betrayal and cultural duty. Infidelity damaged trust, although the decision to stay was based on familism, a significant cultural value in the Philippines that prioritizes keeping the family intact over personal happiness. This aligns with the point Mwangagi (2019) presented, which is that many couples endure difficult times in their marriages for the sake of their children's well-being.

Meanwhile, some individuals who responded indicated that religion and forgiveness enabled them to cope with disagreements. One husband expressed:

"It's easy to forgive each other as long as you don't speak evil words. Just cling to God, and your anger will quickly be relieved" (P2, Samboan)

Here, spirituality evolves into not solely a personal resource but a relational tool for reconciliation. Abdullah (2017) and Boulis (2024) identically stressed that shared faith helps de-escalate conflict and restore peace, offering couples a moral compass during disputes.

Thus, family conflicts were complex, varying from minor disagreements to major betrayals. Nevertheless, trust, forgiveness, and sacrifice consistently emerged as essential techniques for navigating the marriage despite recurring problems.

3. Unforeseen Occurrences

Finally, couples faced unforeseen occurrences, such as the loss of children and difficult living conditions, which deeply affected their lives. The grief of child loss was one of the most painful experiences recounted. A mother lamented:

"Those two daughters of ours passed away; that was just around 2011" (P1, Alcoy 1)

Another parent recalled:

*"Then, one of our children got sick just like that."
(P1, Argao 1)*

Such narratives reveal the extent to which mourning became a permanent aspect of marital life, frequently disrupting communication and emotional intimacy. Worden (2018) noted that the death of a child can disrupt marital equilibrium due to variances in grieving approaches, potentially resulting in emotional isolation between couples. However, several people persevered in silence, reflecting the Filipino tradition of relying on fortitude in the face of hardship and accepting suffering.

In addition to personal loss, couples often spoke of living in demanding situations. One respondent shared:

"I lived there for about nine months because Mindanao was very troubled." (P1, Alcoy 2)

These findings demonstrate how treacherous or unstable living arrangements produced extra levels of stress, especially in conflict-affected or poverty-stricken places. Smith et al. (2019) noted that unfavorable social environments significantly impact family well-being, and in this context, external instability exacerbated the already substantial responsibilities couples faced.

Table 2.1 Contributions to Relationship, based on data obtained from District 2 (Argao, Dalaguete, Alcoy, Boljoon, Oslob, Santander, and Samboan), identifies themes and subthemes that highlight the external elements influencing an elderly couple's experience during their marriage. Four key themes were identified based on the participants' answers during the interview.

Table 3: Contribution to Relationship

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
Strengthened the Bonds	• Resilient faith • Fostered relationship growth
Enhanced communication and understanding	• Fostered transparent communication • Cultivate mutual support
Inspired and Motivated	• Inspired by the presence of children • Unite for the family's well-being
Contributed to enduring love	• Love's resilience • Foundation for happiness

The stories of elderly married couples revealed that overcoming difficulties and experiencing successful moments were essential to a long-lasting marriage. Four primary themes emerged from the study of the interviews addressing their contributions to their relationship: how it increased communication and understanding, inspired and motivated them, reinforced their bonds, and contributed to enduring love. These themes were interconnected rather than discrete, affecting one another and shaping the general standard of marital life.

1. Strengthened the Bonds

Struggles consisted of transforming experiences for couples, functioning as crucibles where faith, humility, and tenacity transformed love into something more resilient and enduring. Spirituality arose not merely as a coping strategy but as a foundation for



reinterpreting pain as constructively. One husband from Samboan shared,

"That's what makes you stronger because if you're always happy, you forget to pray. But when there's pain, your prayers become more intense." (P2, Samboan)

This expression conveys Sternberg's component of commitment, which entails the purposeful decision to maintain the relationship despite suffering. Here, suffering deepened not only marital relationships but also spiritual intimacy, showing that love, for these couples, extended beyond emotion and into commitment. Mahoney and Pargament (2020) reinforce this, asserting that shared faith provides interpretive meaning that translates sorrow into spiritual growth. Based on the lens of the Socio-Ecological Model, faith functioned on numerous levels. Individual level: Faith regulated emotions, promoting acceptance and patience. Interpersonal level: It drove shared meaning-making between spouses, affecting their interactions and forgiveness. Community level: This was reinforced by cultural and religious standards within Filipino culture, which support marriage as a sacred and lifelong commitment.

A wife from Argao remarked,

"The more you go through trials; you just have to hold on. Trusting in God it's really hard not to call on Him during tough times." (P1, Argao)

Faith thus served as a spiritual glue that bound relationships and unified them even amid tension. Couples did not strictly pray for survival they redefined suffering as a heavenly lesson that enhanced intimacy (emotional connection) and commitment (determination to continue). Another wife explained,

"What's crucial for a married couple, when trials come, is learning humility, patience, and forgiveness." (P1, Santander)

This fundamental insight indicates that adversity hardly fractures their love but reinforces it. Through forgiveness and humility, couples transformed their religious commitment into emotional resilience, turning sorrow into a source of strength in their relationships. In this approach, the triangular theory and SEM converge: the personal faith (individual system) nurtures mutual endurance (interpersonal system), which is perpetuated by religious-cultural values (macrosystem). Love becomes both psychological and social a real religion articulated through everyday commitment.

2. Enhanced Communication and Understanding

Authentic discourse emerged as a critical strategy that fostered emotional connection and prevented relational stagnation. A spouse from Oslob emphasized

"It's very important to talk to each other, because if not, we'll just end up confused about our feelings." (P2, Oslob)

This insight aligns with Sternberg's theory of intimacy, which involves emotional connection and mutual understanding. When spouses interact candidly, they reassert emotional presence and lessen relational distance. According to Chen and Lee (2019), transparency fosters closeness and prevents disputes from escalating showing that love is sustained not through quietness but through open discussion.

Pursuant to the Socio-Ecological Model, communication operates predominantly at the microsystem level the immediate domain of interaction when spouses negotiate meanings and feelings. Through this constant conversation, partners co-construct harmony and conjoint purpose.

As a participant from Alcoy noted,



"If there's a problem, you have to face and solve it... In marriage, you have to accept both joy and pain." (P2, Alcoy 1)

This expression signifies emotional maturity by recognizing that optimism and grief coexist. In Sternberg's terms, this depicts the confluence of passion and commitment: desire feeds connection, while commitment anchors it in reality. Their love matured from idealistic idealism into a union supported by understanding and practical persistence. Mutual guidance further supplemented communication.

"In times of hardship, helping each other is what gave strength to our relationship." (P1, Alcoy 2)

This gesture embodies the behavioral expression of intimacy empathy translated into action. As Martinez and Smith (2020) suggest, mutual aid promotes resilience by sustaining trust. Consequently, for these couples, communication was the language of intimacy, and support was the proof of commitment.

From a socio-ecological approach, their transparency was shaped not only by personality but also by their familial upbringing (exosystem) and cultural expectations of cooperation (macrosystem). In Filipino culture, pakikisama (harmonious relationship) and pagpapatawad (forgiveness) are socialized characteristics that influence how couples resolve disagreements. Hence, their communication style reflects both personal intent and societal impact, generating a layered framework of understanding.

3. Inspired and Motivated

Family stood out as the foremost external incentive for perseverance. One spouse explained,

"My family is the one who gives me inspiration to keep going, no matter what challenges we face." (P2, Alcoy 1)

In this case, the fidelity aspect of Sternberg's theory is evident: love is maintained not only by emotional attachment, but also by a conscious decision rooted in familial obligation. Garcia and Martinez (2019) suggest that perceived family support fosters resilience a manifestation of the mesosystem, where relationships between family entities influence individual endurance.

Another wife shared,

"I almost left him before, if it weren't for our children." (P1, Dalaguete)

This confession conveys the correlation between marital and parenting roles. Commitment was sustained not just through romantic love, but also by a moral imperative to protect family stability. This is compatible with Filipino principles of utang na loob (debt of gratitude) and kapwa (shared identity), where personal satisfaction is typically subjugated to communal well-being.

Within the exosystem and macrosystem levels, social expectations also endorsed the value of tenacity. Society and church uphold marriage as sacrosanct, giving moral pressure that strengthens commitment. Thus, family became both the motivation and reward for enduring.

As couples entered later phases of life, grandchildren revived affection and purpose. One wife quipped,

"Even though we're facing each other, there's still a cellphone... I said, 'This time is really nice, it's so high-tech now.' That really made us happy." (P1, Alcoy 2)

This absurdity signifies emotional regeneration it demonstrates how intimacy (companionship) endures, whereas passion evolves into a shared delight and affection. Through intergenerational connections, couples experienced continuity and importance, illustrating how love is transmitted across the



social ecology from their marriage to their family and the broader kin system.

4. Contributed to Enduring Love

Love, as defined by participants, was not rigid but rather developed over time, through adversity, and with communal faith. A spouse from Boljoon explained,

"No matter what trials come, our love continues and grows stronger because we help each other." (P2, Boljoon 1)

This attitude depicts consummate love, the supreme form in Sternberg's theory, in which intimacy, passion, and commitment coexist. The couple's long-term perseverance was built on tolerance, forgiveness, and conjoint intent features that enabled love to mature.

From a socio-ecological perspective, this constant love represents the outcome of several reinforcing systems: individual-level emotional control, prayer, and personal resilience. Microsystem: Daily interaction and guidance between spouses. Mesosystem: Family interdependence and conjoint parenting responsibilities. Exosystem and Macrosystem: Cultural conventions, religious teachings, and institutional incentives that maintain marriage.

A wife from Argao stated this clearly:

"Our trust and respect for each other is what gives a strong foundation to our happiness."

Credibility and reverence embody intimacy and devotion demonstrating that love, for them, is a deliberate exercise of faith, patience, and moral accountability. In addition, Patel et al. (2023) also verify that emotional interaction and respect specifically correlate to marital pleasure.

Ultimately, these findings underscore that enduring love among Filipino couples is a complex and multifaceted cultural phenomenon. It is determined not only by emotional affection but also by spiritual

traditions, family values, and social customs that collectively motivate fidelity. By means of the intersection of Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love and the Socio-Ecological Model, it proves obvious that persistent love is either psychological and ecological a manifestation of internal devotion and the external systems that uphold it.

Love, then, is not only a sensation but a perpetual relationship that is sustained by discourse, forged by hardship, nurtured by familial bonds, and refined by faith. With the decades of communal living, these couples illustrate how love matures from sentimentality to perseverance, converting distinct instances into a unified reminder of faith, culture, and human tenacity.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the lived experiences of older married couples in Southern Cebu, with a particular focus on those who have been together for over thirty years. The goal was to understand the factors that contribute to the long-term success of marriages within the Philippine cultural context. One of the challenges this research addressed was the lack of detailed insight into the emotional, relational, and cultural aspects that support long-lasting marriages, particularly in a family-oriented society.

The findings showed that important family milestones like anniversaries or children's achievements play a significant role in strengthening emotional bonds. While the couples faced common challenges, such as financial difficulties, family conflicts, or the loss of loved ones, they often saw these hardships as opportunities to grow and become more resilient. Key ingredients for sustaining long marriages included open communication, mutual support, shared values, and a strong foundation in faith and spirituality. The couples also demonstrated emotional maturity,



aligned goals, and persistence, all of which helped deepen their connection over time.

These findings are helpful for practitioners and organizations interested in supporting healthy, lasting marriages, including community groups, marital counselors, and relationship educators. Understanding the importance of family and spirituality in the Philippines can help design programs that strengthen marital resilience and coping strategies. The study also highlights the importance of fostering generosity, respect, and emotional closeness qualities that help couples maintain love as they grow older. For future research, it would be valuable to compare these marital experiences across different regions and cultural contexts to see how universal these patterns are. Using mixed-method approaches combining qualitative stories with quantitative validation could strengthen the findings and show how resilience and cultural influences shape marital life. Longitudinal studies could also track the evolution of coping strategies and marital quality over time.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the existing literature by presenting culturally grounded stories that illustrate how aging couples in the Philippines maintain strong, satisfying marriages. It illustrates the transformative power of love rooted in faith, shared values, and resilience, offering an encouraging reminder that lasting marital fulfillment is possible even in the face of life's many challenges.

Ethical Consideration

This study adhered to ethical standards for human participant research. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, the confidentiality measures in place, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequences.

Consent to Participate

Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the study.

Consent for Publication

Written informed consent for publication of the participants' information and responses was obtained.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares that there are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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