

Breaking Social Norms: Lived Stories of The Unmarried Elderly

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Abstract

This study was conducted to uncover the lives of the unmarried elderly in the Southern Mindanao by providing useful information about their psychological well-being in terms of their positive thoughts, positive feelings, triumphs or successes, hopes or aspirations, and meaningful reasons for defying social norms. The study has ten (10) informants, composed of five unmarried men and five unmarried women carefully selected based on their predefined characteristics. In conducting the study, the researcher utilized a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire that was validated by three experts. The data were gathered through an in-depth interview with each of the informants, observations, and conversations with some key informants. All pertinent data were obtained using an electronic audio recorder and observational field notes. Consequently, all relevant data were transcribed, reviewed, and analyzed extensively through a thorough coding process and triangulation methods to come up with valid and reliable results. The results were discussed through a thematic analysis matrix to represent the data in an organized and comprehensive manner. After carefully examining the gathered data, this phenomenological inquiry has found significant findings. Particularly, their positive thoughts revealed three major themes, including individual functioning, social functioning, and a secured social network. Their positive feelings identified only one central theme, which is self-actualization. Only one main theme has emerged for their triumphs or successes, namely, their life accomplishments. For their hopes or aspirations, it also came up with one key theme: quality of life. Lastly, their meaningful reasons for breaking social norms have identified two significant themes: predetermination and self-determination. As indicated in the results of the study, the informants' positive attitudes across all aspects of their lives helped them understand their purpose or life's meaning. Thus, their optimistic view of life enabled them to function positively, which contributed significantly to their psychological well-being.

Keywords: Happiness, positive psychology, psychological well-being, single, social norms, unmarried elderly

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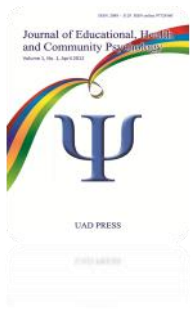


Introduction

The number of elderly people who choose to be single and become unmarried is dramatically rising, which can lead to several implications. One of which is the emerging singlehood phenomenon among older adults (Hamedanchi et al., [2020](#)). According to Anna Brown in the article by Peter McGraw, a professor of marketing and psychology, about half of American adults are unmarried accounting to 128 million of the population as per current statistics from the Pew Research Center (McGraw, [2021](#)). In the Philippines, the PSA conducts a population census every ten years to collect data on the marital status of people aging to 10 and older. As of the report in 2020 census report of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA, [2023](#)), there were 86.33 million Filipinos and 34.26 million persons were never married accounting to 39.7% of the population of the respondents. Along with, there is also a growing number of elderly people who had never been married, and choosing singlehood seemed to undermine the social norm of being in a relationship; thus, they are more inclined to be stereotyped, especially women who face marginalization or stigma while men are regarded as the most disadvantaged (Slonim et al., [2015](#); Sakalli-Ugurlu et al., [2018](#); Lin & Brown, [2012](#)). Apart from that, men and women who had never been married had a substantially lower quality of life than those who were married (Piekut, [2020](#)).

On the contrary, several studies contended about the positive aspects of being single and unmarried such as improved quality of life and psychological well-being, increased happiness, efficient time management, more economic opportunities, secured social networks, better social relationships, and increased emotional support (Jones et al., [2012](#); Timonen & Doyle, [2013](#); Sarkisian & Gerstel, [2015](#); Apostolou, [2017](#); Van Tilburg & Suanet, [2018](#); Lesch & Watt, [2018](#); Kislev, [2019](#); Apostolou et al., [2020](#); Mueksch, [2022](#); Hamedanchi et al., [2021](#)).

Moreover, Santos et al. ([2019](#)) indicated that elderly people who chose to live alone want to maintain their independence and autonomy. Considerably, older adults are aware of the reality and advantages



of being single and unmarried which enabled them to find acceptance and satisfaction centered on their high self-esteem (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014). In addition, a study by Hamedanchi et al. (2021) about the lived experiences of twelve (12) never married older adults found out that they have a sense of independence, strive toward self-development, overcome feelings of loneliness, and keep strong connections with family and friends.

Considerably, based on the review done on the work of Hamedanchi et al. (2021), it was found out that most of the studies on the life of unmarried older adults are quantitative such as correlational, comparative and some are mixed method study which are conducted in developed countries focusing on physical health. Hence, little is known about the lives of unmarried elderly people, which may not accurately represent unmarried elderly people in developing nations, particularly in the Philippines. It was on these grounds that the researcher addressed the gaps of the previous research. Wherefore, this phenomenological inquiry focused on unveiling the lives of the unmarried elderly in the Southern Philippines.

In this regard, the present study served as a tool in helping the informants find meaning in their lives by looking at their well-being in a new light and focusing on what is good and positive in their lives based on how they accept and uphold themselves with favorable attitudes toward positive functioning. Thus, it focused only on exploring what contributes to their psychological well-being in terms of their positive thoughts, positive feelings, triumphs or successes, hopes and/or aspirations, and meaningful reasons for breaking social norms.

Ultimately, this study attempted to elicit responses to the central question: I. What contributes to the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly considering their singlehood? Consequently, this was followed by five (5) sub-questions: I.1 What are their positive thoughts about being single and



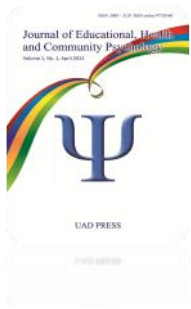
unmarried at their age? 1.2 What are their positive feelings about being single and unmarried at their age? 1.3 What are their triumphs/successes considering that they are single and unmarried at their age? 1.4 What are their hopes/aspirations considering that they are single and unmarried at their age? 1.5 What meaningful reasons do they hold for going against the social norms?

Method

This chapter presents the processes employed by the researcher in attaining the purpose of this study. Particularly, it presents the research design, the role of the researcher, research participants and materials, sampling procedure and design, data collection, data analysis, validity, and ethical considerations.

Design

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design that explored the lived stories of unmarried elderly people. The phenomenological research design was used to describe and explore the participants' daily experiences and how they cope with them. It was utilized in examining the feelings, thoughts, and beliefs of the participants to understand the core of the phenomena under inquiry and to determine what a certain event means to a group of individuals and how they experienced it. The use of this approach is credited to German mathematician and philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), who sought a means to explore how individuals are consciously aware and realize the meaning of their experiences in formal academic scientific inquiry (Bliss, 2016). As a result, this design has enabled the researcher to use a phenomenological research approach in investigating how experiences, traditions, and culture impact ordinary, everyday actions by extracting stories from participants through the gathering of experiences and interpretation of the meanings of their activities, in which the methods include conversational interviewing through in-depth interviews and discussions. Moreover, the study's purpose, in line with this research approach, was to interpret



the meaning of experiences to understand individual experiences in detail.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher was the primary instrument of the study. The data were gathered by the researcher, who served as the human instrument, through an in-depth interview. In addition, the researcher has been responsible for incorporating reliable and unbiased research findings and conclusions drawn from the data obtained to establish the rigor of the study and for upholding the moral duty of treating informants professionally while adhering to ethical guidelines.

Aside from that, the study's researcher has acknowledged his personal background and knowledge in the field of psychology, which have a significant impact on conducting the study in a psychologically and empirically sound manner. Moreover, the researcher has observed phenomenological reduction and descriptive bracketing to minimize the personal biases presented in the results and findings of the study. In addition, the researcher has thoroughly analyzed the data from the informants based on the interviews to increase the credibility and validity of the results. The researcher effectively used the interview materials, extracted the details, and ensured the accuracy of the information. Aside from that, the researcher also consulted with the research adviser throughout the development of the research instruments to be guided on the most relevant data gathered from the informants, which aided the researcher in developing the exact themes out of the information.

Research Participants and Materials

The study included ten (10) informants, which composed of five unmarried men and five unmarried women. The purpose of selecting the informants of the study was based on the qualifications of the participants identified in the inclusion criteria. The materials used include the semi structured interview guide questionnaire, which was validated by three (3) experts. Along with this, the researcher also used an electronic voice recorder to document the responses of the informants during

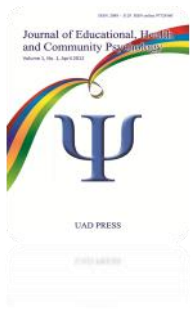


the course of the interview.

Thus, to understand their lived stories in the succeeding sections, a short presentation of the informants' profile and background has been presented to help appreciate and grasp the individual experiences of the informants in a clear and meaningful manner. The informants of the study were purposefully visited and interviewed by the researcher in different places in some of the municipalities in the Province of Cotabato. Therefore, the researcher obtained significant information, was able to observe and capture a glimpse of their attitudes and behaviors, their character, and their present condition, and went deeper into their meaningful experiences about the certain phenomenon.

Informant 1: Auntie Inday is 65 years old and has been a retired government employee for about 5 years. She is polite and accommodating to her visitors, speaks with conviction, and is a hopeful and God-centered woman. Apart from that, she is open, accepting, and understanding of other people's criticisms. In fact, during her years of working, she became engaged in her job, which made her feel inspired and happy, resulting in a positive work experience such as reaching her retirement age. She lives with her mother, nieces, nephews, and grandchildren under one roof, and having a comfortable home makes her satisfied with what she has and her everyday routines. According to some people who are close to her, she is a hardworking woman, kind to her fellow men, and has sacrificed a lot by dedicating most of her time to caring for and attending to her late brother and aging mother.

Informants 2 and 3 of the study were siblings who live in the same house. Informant 2: Ma'am Tery is the elder sister of Auntie Judith. She is a retired teacher and is now 73 years old. She is a work-oriented person who organizes her daily tasks and is thoughtful, optimistic, and humorous. In addition, she is a strong and compassionate woman who has her standards, is direct and prompt, and is assertive in her beliefs. Ma'am Tery spent her time working and attending to her own priorities, which caused her to become focused on her job, and has strived to help a lot of her students beyond receiving her

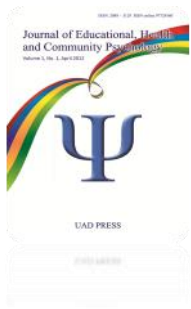


salary. Furthermore, she grew up in a family of four single guardians and was raised in accordance with how her single guardians lived and what they desired for her to live.

Informant 3: Auntie Judith is Ma'am Tery's younger sister, and she is now 66 years old. She did not have any professional job, but she worked hard to find any means to sustain her daily needs as a stay-at-home woman. Aside from that, she is soft-hearted, appreciative, and a serious type of person. Ma'am Tery and Auntie Judith, according to a close relative, are God-centered individuals who have positive relationships with their family and others. Both are content with their lives and have prioritized personal care as a means of caring for themselves. They are said to be generous and kind to their immediate family members. Moreover, Auntie Judith is known to be a hardworking person, helpful, and a provider for the needs of the family.

Informant 4: Ma'am Bing is a 66-year-old woman who is welcoming to her visitors and an approachable, kind, and joyful person. She is a retired teacher who has had satisfactory experience in teaching, where she developed a good and positive relationship with her colleagues. She was surrounded by several single individuals in her circle of friends and motivated by the idea that being single is fine. At her age, she spent her time in church as God's servant in one of the ministries. Aside from this, she has a passion to help others, is family-oriented, and is hopeful for good living conditions. Ma'am Bing currently lives with her nieces in a simple but peaceful home. According to those acquainted with her, she is a giver and provider; she offered her home as a temporary refuge to one of her nephew's families without expecting anything in return. She is also known for being strict, but she has a motherly attitude towards her nieces and nephews. Ma'am Bing is respected by her family and relatives, and her opinion is valued and considered.

Informant 5: Uncle Kaabag is a 57-year-old man who appears to be an "uncle figure." He is a simple, quiet, serious, and formal type of person who is also open to any matters of goodwill. Besides, he has



been a godly servant for more than 25 years and serves as a lay minister in their chapel and parish. Aside from serving God and his fellowmen, he also works as a farmer as a means of living and a source of income. As mentioned by some people who know him, he is a hardworking person, supportive of his family, helpful, kind, humble, and loving to his nieces, nephews, and godchildren.

Informant 6: Sir Ibo is a retired company guard and is now 65 years old. He appears to have a happy-looking face and always smiles and laughs at any given moment every time he talks. Aside from this, he is attentive, open, and approachable, yet he seems to provoke an "authoritative energy." Sir Ibo lives with her elder sister in a simple house and does farming as his current work after retiring from his job. During the years of his job as a company guard, helping other people became his passion, including helping abused and molested women. As mentioned by some of the key informants, Sir Ibo is giving to his family and other people. He is kind, has helped a lot of people, and has a good academic background.

Informant 7: Uncle Jun is a 65-year-old man and a farmer. He appears to be a typical elderly man, yet he is still active, and he displays a "bubbly grandfather figure." In addition, he looks simple, approachable, and accommodating. According to some people who know him, he is cheerful, helpful to his family, kind to others, hardworking, and work-focused. Furthermore, Uncle Jun spent his whole life focusing on his priorities, such as any work related to farming.

Informant 8: Nong Mando is also a farmer and is now 62 years old, strong, and healthy. He is a serious type of person, kind, welcoming, and appears to be a "simple old man." Additionally, he is hopeful, cautious in making his decisions, and a communicative person. Nong Mando is family-oriented, and he lives in a comfortable house with his adopted child. Apart from that, the key informant mentioned that he is kind, approachable, trustworthy, hardworking, open to others, strives to help his fellow men, has a good relationship with his family, and has strong social support.



Informant 9: Lolo Reneng lives alone in his huge and comfortable house, provided by his nephew. He is a houseman, who is now 74 years old but is still active and rides a bicycle in the streets and highways. He is welcoming, optimistic, family-oriented, God-fearing, grateful, and content with his life. According to some of the people close to him, he is hardworking, kind, and giving to others. Aside from that, he sacrificed a lot, spent most of his life caring for and attending to his late mother, and supported his nieces and nephews in school until they graduated.

Informant 10: Auntie Lucy is a 68-year-old stay-at-home woman. She has standards when it comes to a man who must match her achievements. Apart from that, she is God-centered, family-oriented, content, and a pleasant-looking woman. Auntie Lucy lives with her nieces, nephews, and siblings, and based on the key informants, she has a close relationship with her family. She is supportive and helpful to their needs, and is kind and reliable.

Sampling Procedure and Design

The researcher interviewed ten (10) informants, who were five (5) unmarried men and five (5) unmarried women from the local context of the Southern Philippines, during the conduct of the study. The researcher chose the study's informants using purposive (non-probability) sampling technique.

In purposive sampling, the researcher selected informants based on their predefined characteristics that answered the gaps in the study. Also, this was according to the purpose of the study, which can provide in-depth and rich information on the phenomenon being studied. This technique was appropriate for a phenomenological study since the goal was to understand and describe a phenomenon from the viewpoint of those who have experienced it. Hence, ten to fifteen participants are enough, given that they can provide rich descriptions of the phenomenon (Penner & McClement, 2008). Moreover, the qualitative researcher has determined the qualifying criteria that each participant has met and has been chosen as one of the informants of the study, specifically: an older adult (elderly),



aged 56 and older; unmarried, single, and not in a cohabitation agreement, either in a romantic relationship or in a serious courtship and dating; never been legally married, separated, or annulled; and currently residing in the Southern Philippines.

Data Collection

This study employed a variety of methods in gathering the data needed to be obtained. First, the researcher identified the informants of the study, who were the sources of data gathered considering the inclusion criteria and sampling technique. As mentioned in the sampling procedure and design, this study utilized a purposive (non-probability) sampling technique in choosing the informants of the study. After identifying and selecting the informants, the researcher then visited and presented the communication letters, such as the informed consent for research and informed consent for recording, detailing the crucial research information, such as risks and benefits, and allowing the informants to make an informed decision concerning their voluntary participation and the sole use of the recorded data.

After the informants agreed and signed the consent form, the interview followed. In line with this, the researcher employed a specific interview method to obtain information from the informants. Using an in-depth interview with each of the informants, the researcher used a semi-structured interview guide questionnaire validated by three (3) experts and, at the same time, an electronic audio recorder to capture all the data needed to answer the research questions presented in the study.

The interview questions developed have focused on the lived experiences of the unmarried elderly, specifically on their psychological well-being and happiness, as well as the reasons why they defy social norms, and were supported by probing questions to fully understand and obtain more in depth information. Furthermore, the researcher adhered to research ethical guidelines and objectively followed the purpose of the study in gathering the data.



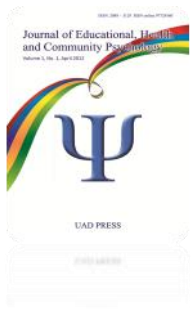
Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used in this study to identify important or interesting data patterns and to answer the research questions, wherein the thematic analysis matrix was employed to analyze informant data derived from the Qualitative Data Analysis process of Creswell and Creswell (2018) that involves sequential methods taken, ranging from specific to general, and having various levels of analysis. As a result, the researcher was able to become acquainted with the data, identify significant statements, generate meanings, cluster themes, and assist with interpretation.

In this way, the researcher has come up with written descriptions drawn from the phenomenon of interest. In fact, qualitative data analysis requires researchers to look at the process that has to be done in a certain order, from specific to the general, and that has to be analyzed on more than one level. In line with this, Creswell and Creswell (2018) identified five steps to be followed in the process of qualitative data analysis.

First, organize and prepare the data for analysis. To do this, interviews must be transcribed, materials must be optically scanned, field notes must be printed, all visual materials must be compiled, and the data must be sorted and organized into various types based on the information's sources.

Second, read or look at all the data. This initial stage gives an overview of the material as well as an opportunity to deliberate its overall significance or meaning, which includes considering participants' general thoughts, the overall tone of the ideas, and overall sense of the information's depth, reliability, and relevance. At this point, qualitative researchers may make comments in the margins of transcripts or observational field notes, or begin writing general thoughts about the data.

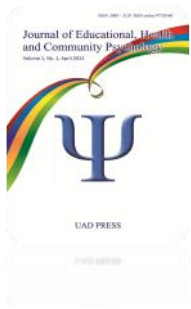


Third, start coding all of the data. Data is organized using coding, which involves putting words between chunks of text or images and representing a category. It entails gathering text data or photos acquired during data collection, categorizing sentences (or paragraphs) or visuals, and labeling those categories with a word or terms, frequently based on the participant's real or actual language (also known as an in vivo term).

Fourth, generate a description and themes. The coding process is used to develop a description of the setting or individuals, as well as categories or topics for study. A description is a thorough representation of information about an event, people, or place. This description can be coded by researchers. In addition, coding is used to create several themes or categories as well. These are the themes that emerge as key results in qualitative research. Moreover, they should include several viewpoints from different people and be supported by various quotations and detailed proof.

Fifth, representing the description and themes. Consider in advance the qualitative narrative's representation of the description and themes. The most common method is to provide the analysis results in a narrative piece. This might be a chronological discussion, a thorough discussion of various topics (complete with subthemes, particular illustrations, multiple viewpoints from persons, and quotations), or a debate with interconnected themes. Thus, qualitative researchers supplement their discussions with graphics, figures, or tables.

Also, Qualitative Data Analysis (QDA) software was further utilized to assist the researcher in managing the data for analysis and valid results. Running the data through software was managed by an expert in qualitative research through a licensed software. Hence, the results were derived through an extensive and valid process.



Importantly, the researcher also employed the triangulation method as a research strategy to come up with comprehensive results and findings drawn from multiple methods and approaches used. The triangulation method employed in this study refers to the multiple theoretical models used, the data collection methods that involve in-depth interviews and documentation of the responses, and lastly, the research instruments that include the validated interview guide questionnaire from three (3) experts. Also, the group of participants were qualified in participating and answering the research questions of the study. Hence, the sources for triangulating the data to establish the rigor of the study were the participants, key informants, and the documents, including observational field notes.

Results

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the data gathered from the in-depth interview. The study included ten (10) informants: five unmarried men and five unmarried women, who were older adults (elderly) aged 56 and older who have never been legally married, separated, or annulled; single and not in a cohabitation agreement, romantic relationship, or serious courtship and dating; and living in the Southern Philippines.

The presentation of data aimed to provide valuable information about the lives of unmarried elderly people in the context of their happiness and psychological well-being. Hence, it directly aimed to answer the central question, "What contributes to the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly considering their singlehood?" Furthermore, it sought to directly address the sub-questions concerning their positive thoughts and feelings about being single and unmarried at their age, their triumphs and successes, their hopes and aspirations, as well as the meaningful reasons that they hold for going against social norms.



The findings were derived based on the consolidated responses of the informants, and several viewpoints obtained were also included in the discussion, such as some of the individuals or significant statements that are presented in various quotations as detailed proof.

The matrix which was the results of the thematic analysis yielded the following themes: Positive Thoughts of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Positive Feelings of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Triumphs or Successes of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Hopes and Aspirations of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, and Meaningful Reasons for Breaking Social Norms.

Positive thoughts are categorized into three main themes: individual functioning, social functioning, and a secure social network. **Individual functioning** consists of five aspects: reduced responsibilities, freedom and autonomy, exploration and enjoyment, being goal-oriented, and developed qualities. **Social functioning** encompasses four areas: interest or motivation to engage in activities, leaving a positive legacy, supporting immediate family or relatives, and assisting others. **A secure social network** includes three components: a supportive environment, family as a source of inspiration, and a circle of friends. On the other hand, **positive feelings** revolve around a single central theme: self-actualization, which is further divided into five elements: acceptance, fulfillment, gratitude, true happiness, and peace of mind.

Triumphs or successes are centered around one main theme: life accomplishments. This theme is divided into four categories: longevity, achievements of immediate family members, service and retirement, and property investments.

When it comes to **hopes and aspirations**, there is one major theme: quality of life. This theme includes four categories: faith in God, overcoming life's challenges, health and personal care, and good living conditions.



Finally, the **meaningful reasons for breaking social norms** are grouped into two major themes: predetermination and self-determination. **Predetermination** has one category, which is fate and destiny, while **self-determination** includes six categories: personal decision, contentment, loss of interest, work engagement, socioeconomic status, and social influence.

Discussion

The four aspects identified from the participants' qualitative answers are as follows: Positive Thoughts of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Positive Feelings of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Triumphs or Successes of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, Hopes and Aspirations of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age, and Meaningful Reasons for Breaking Social Norms. The themes for each aspect are discussed as follows:

Positive Thoughts of the Unmarried Elderly at their Age

The positive thoughts of the unmarried elderly reflect how they deal with life with an optimistic and favorable outlook given their singlehood. This entails envisioning oneself in a wholesome existence, such as that of a fully self-functioning individual and being socially connected with others in a positive social environment that allows them to authentically live in the present and future endeavors.

The three major themes, composed of several categories, directly answer the first research question regarding the positive thoughts of elderly individuals about being single and/or unmarried at their age. These themes mainly include individual functioning, social functioning, and a secured social network. Individual functioning implies that they are fully functioning individuals who think and act according to their freedom and independence. Social functioning is defined by how fully engaged they are with their environment and others and by how effectively they maintain interpersonal relationships or social interactions. A secured social network represents a healthy environment and positive relationship with



others that provides a good and positive regard, allowing them to live meaningfully.

The first major theme which is individual functioning, has emerged with five (5) categories, and these have been identified as fewer obligations, freedom and autonomy, exploration and enjoyment, goal-orientedness, and learned qualities.

The second main theme that has come to light was social functioning, and four (4) categories have been classified as interest or desire to do things, a good legacy, helping immediate family/relatives, and helping other people.

The third major theme that has been found was secured social network. The researcher found three (3) categories that were listed as a wholesome environment, family as inspiration, and a circle of friends as good influences.

Individual Functioning

The concept of individual functioning refers to the ability of unmarried elderly people to think and act freely and independently. It means that they serve their purpose, as reflected in directing one's attention to their personal lives, interests, and goals. In the context of this study, individual functioning focused on how they live with greater independence and were more self-focused. Hence, functioning is solely centered on the individual. Northway (2015) cited the work of Morris, which conveys two significant ideas regarding independence: from a professional perspective, independence is often viewed in terms of an individual's ability to perform tasks independently, whereas from an alternative perspective, independence is concerned with autonomy and the ability to exercise control.



As independent and self-directed individuals, along with being single and unmarried, they were merely liable for a few responsibilities, which allowed them to concentrate and achieve their personal goals. Their strong desire to reach their goals showed that they are highly motivated to do more by engaging in accomplishment-related behaviors. Apart from that, their sense of independence influenced their ability to pursue what they desire to do and make wise choices as self-governing individuals. This indicates their freedom from any restrictions and the power to stand by their personal decisions. One study revealed that there were three dimensions of independence in doing things alone: it is essential to a person's individuality for being an independent person (self-identity); it indicates a quite assertive type of direct autonomy that recognizes individuals as self-sufficient or independent agents with strong control over their choices and actions (self-sufficiency reliance); and individuals choose to continue doing some things on their own (functional activities of daily living) (Hillcoat-Nalletamby, [2014](#)).

Moreover, they were able to discover new things, had fun, and took advantage of their freedom by going to various destinations and capturing every moment. Significantly, elderly people who had never been married have lived healthy lives with stable and positive personalities. Thus, they were able to develop their character by finding good traits that came out of their experience as self-functioning individuals. According to the American Psychological Association, a psychologically healthy person is one who enjoys a wide range of personal freedoms, able to work independently, exemplifies creativity, and lives an existentially meaningful life (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

As reflected in the theoretical frameworks of the study, one element of the PERMA Model of well-being, which is engagement, relate to how the unmarried elderly people engaged with their interests and directed their attention toward doing things to attain their goals. Particularly, engagement is a psychological connection to events or activities, such as being engaged, interested, and involved in life (Kern et al., [2014](#)). Also, two dimensions of the Six (6) Factor Model of Psychological Well-being



affirmed this emerging worldview about individual functioning, which are autonomy and personal growth. Autonomy allowed unmarried elderly people to maintain their personal independence and their convictions, and it let them choose for themselves and make their own decisions. In addition, personal growth reflected their continuing process of self-improvement in areas such as self-awareness, attitudes, emotional maturity, and efficiency. Essentially, it is the pursuit of knowledge, unique experiences, and the realization of one's potential. Indeed, individual functioning is grounded on the domains or dimensions of the theories employed.

Fewer obligations. Most of the informants said that the good thing about being single and unmarried is not being responsible for or obligated to many things, especially at home, referring to the roles and responsibilities for your own family. Majority of them reported feeling reasonably carefree in terms of household duties. Apostolou et al. (2020) indicated that single people have fewer responsibilities and less time constraints while working toward their personal success. Possible reasons indicated were the resistance to make commitments and carry out obligations that a relationship includes. Reasonably, one informant said:

“I can say that my responsibilities are lesser because, when you are married, you have a lot of responsibilities even when you are old.” (Female Informant 4, Ma’am Bing)

Considering the fact that they do not have a lot of obligations to worry about, another informant saw the positive aspect of this matter and was delighted that being focused on fewer jobs makes it easier to concentrate on them since they do not think of anything but themselves and their job, which is the only function or task they have to deal with. Because of this, they can use their time well to meet their daily commitments. As remarked:



“Focusing on my work is positive because that is the only obligation I have to deal with.” (Male Informant 7, Uncle Jun)

This informant emphasized:

“Of course, as a single person, I can work well and fulfill my obligations in farming. That's it, nothing more.” (Male Informant 7, Uncle Jun)

Freedom and Autonomy. One of the positive sides of being single and/or unmarried is having freedom. Freedom signifies independence, in which one is free to pursue their own goals and not constrained in any way by other people. Considerably, they have the power and the right to do whatever they want. As a result, they were capable of experiencing an inner sense of liberty. A previous study by Apostolou (2017) found that in the "freedom" domain, individuals may prefer to be single in order to be free to do what they want by advancing their careers and growing their social network by spending a great deal of time with friends. Consistent with this notion, a study on the causes of Singapore's high levels of singlehood asserted that one good thing about being single is that you can use your time however you want (Jones et al., 2012).

In addition, autonomy was also an aspect of their sense of independence in that they are accountable for making decisions and choices and can stand by them. As unmarried individuals, they were self-governing and responsible for controlling their lives. As indicated by Santos et al. (2019), older adults who choose to live alone want to maintain their autonomy and independence.

So, the informants have made it clear that having freedom means being free from everything. This includes being free from the responsibilities of your own family and home, being free from the limits or



restrictions of your partner and children, and being free from the problems that a married couple faces. As significantly expressed:

“No one will stop you from doing what you want to do, and whatever problems interfere with those who are married, I am free from those.” (Female Informant 4, Ma’am Bing)

In addition to being free from everything, some of them have also mentioned their freedom to do anything, such as going anywhere or to some places, leaving their houses, going to work, and going home anytime. One informant even stated:

“I have the freedom to go anywhere, whether to visit my rice fields or to visit my siblings.” (Male Informant 7, Uncle Jun)

Furthermore, as autonomous individuals, they were also the ones who are mainly in charge of making decisions for their lives. They acted in a way that benefits themselves, which means that they make decisions or take actions that were in their best interests because they sometimes relied on themselves. Apparently, they have a close relationship with their family, whom they can ask, but sometimes they preferred to govern themselves. The informants remarked:

“It contributes to and affects me a lot... I can freely make decisions for my own good.” (Female Informant 4, Ma’am Bing)

“I am happy because being alone is not a problem, and whatever you want and plan to do, you are able to do it straight ahead without hesitance due to the fact that you have no one to consult but yourself.” (Male Informant 5, Uncle Kaabag)



Exploration and Enjoyment. For the unmarried, exploration is more of an adventure that involves traveling to new places, which is a great way to expand the sense of being one with the world, resulting in a priceless experience that is full of enjoyment. According to a peer-reviewed publication, people's daily physical environments have an impact on their well-being. As noted by Catherine Hartley, an assistant professor at New York University's Department of Psychology and one of the paper's co-authors, people are happier when they travel to new places and have more diverse experiences (Heller et al., [2020](#)).

One of the informants have traveled extensively around the Philippines and have seen a significant number of the country's most beautiful attractions. This informant proudly shared: "I have traveled around the Philippines and visited almost all of the beautiful spots, and that is because of my work and whenever we are called for training." (Female Informant 2, Ma'am Tery)

Another informant also recalled some of the early experiences of having a fulfilling experience while going to other places. As stated: "When I was around 18 to 19 years old, I enjoyed my teenage years because I went to many places with my friends." (Male Informant 7, Uncle Jun)

Aside from this, as they enjoyed every moment of their lives by traveling to other places, some informants still aimed to visit more beautiful places to enjoy the scenery. One informant wishfully mentioned:

"I want to visit some tourist spots with my family when they are successful because they will have enough money to spend." (Female Informant 10, Auntie Lucy)

Goal-orientedness. As unmarried individuals who have high regard for a positive outlook in life, they apparently have an optimistic view of attaining their goals. Based on their responses, they were known



to be goal-driven, career-focused, motivated, and industrious. Importantly, they go along with their plans, having the happiness while being determined and persevered to pursue their goals. Thus, these goals aid in focusing their attention on a specific purpose that promotes a sense of self-mastery in order to successfully achieve or reach their expected outcome.

Geitz et al. (2015) cited Maehr and Zusho's idea of goal orientation, which is based on a social-cognitive theory of achievement motivation that outlines the types of goals that influence achievement-related actions. In addition, Vandewalle et al. (2019) also quoted Dweck and Elliott's two main types of goal orientations: learning goals and performance goals. With learning goals, people want to learn or master something new. With performance goals, people want to get positive judgments of their competence or avoid getting negative judgments.

As shared by the informants, they felt inspired by their job and became more focused on their own goals. In fact, two informants articulated:

“When I was still working as an employee in the LGU, so many good things happened in my life. I'm always inspired to go to work, and I do not choose which office I will be assigned to work in; I am not lazy.” (Female Informant 1, Auntie Inday)

“I just focus on my plans and I don't think about anything else.” (Female Informant 2, Ma'am Tery)

Another informant expressed strong hope about reaching one's goal. She said: “I also hope that I will have the determination on a daily basis to reach my dreams while I am still strong.” (Female Informant 3, Auntie Judith)

Learned qualities. These learned qualities of the unmarried elderly were the result of their experiences throughout their entire lives. Learning through personal experiences was the greatest event that



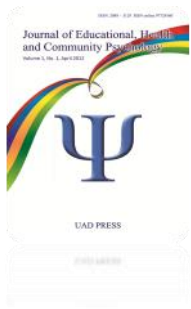
happened in their lives since that has improved one's character across every aspect. It gave them insight into their own personalities and helped them appreciate their resilience as single individuals. In light of this, the study of Koballa contends that factors such as personality, experience, learning preferences, and environmental settings have an effect on how people develop their attitudes, behaviors, and sense of transformation (Tsai & Tang, 2017).

Taking this into consideration, as they have fewer obligations in life, they become more free and more capable of making their own decisions. With this freedom, they have explored and enjoyed their life in any way that they wanted, along with being committed to reaching their goals. From that, they have learned so much in their quest for a thriving life and secure well-being. One informant genuinely shared:

“Based on my experiences, I learned to be brave, understanding, and compassionate. That's because of all my training and experiences as a single person.” (Female Informant 2, Ma'am Tery)

Social Functioning

Their degree of social functioning may be gauged by seeing how actively they engage with and relate to their environment and by how well they maintain their relationships with other people. It implies that they get in touch with others through social interactions and by forming meaningful connections to satisfy their fundamental human need to belong. Thus, social functioning is centered on how unmarried elderly people live their lives in relation to other people. In relation to this, Cai, Ten, You, Zhang, and Chen (2024) cited Huber et al. in stating that social functioning is how an individual operates within their social environment, including engagement in social activities, maintaining social connections, and making societal contributions. This can be seen on how they perform these to their families, communities and other social settings. Further, they cited Rowe and Kahn that to maintain a healthy



aging, emphasis is placed on maintaining physiological, psychological, and social well-being throughout the lives of older adults.

As social beings, they not only live to connect but also aspire to leave a positive influence. Hence, they are naturally inclined to direct their attention toward doing important things to connect with other people, such as having the desire to share their time and resources, using their abilities to make a positive impact on other people's lives by exemplifying great morals, extending a hand to and supporting the basic needs of the family, and helping fellow citizens who are in need.

To give light, positive influence is the significant impact people have on others or on themselves by expressing their strengths and virtues. It entails doing what makes individuals happy and finding satisfaction in helping others. As to the behavioral traits of positive influencers, they live a meaningful life, embody wisdom, and are willing to help others in need (Tromp, [2022](#)).

In explicating this emerging worldview through the lens of the theories utilized in the study, this concept was reflected in the core elements of engagement, relationships, and meaning in the PERMA Model. It postulates that engagement is doing something that engages an individual; relationships are the natural desire of human beings to be connected and be part of a group by forming relationships; and meaning is beyond money and material possessions, wherein people find meaning in their lives, such as working hard to provide for their families (CFI Team, [2022](#)).

Interest or desire to do things. In one aspect of the lives of the unmarried elderly, they have the desire to direct one's attention toward continuing to do things. This idea shows how they are driven to give their time and attention to something, mostly their job and other work-related activities. Taking this into consideration, participants who took part in the study by Lesch and Watt ([2018](#)) mentioned their work or job as a means of dealing with singlehood.



This idea includes their need to socialize and talk to other people, which is clear from the fact that they are committed to their work and interest in sharing their knowledge, learning, and insights with anyone who comes to them. According to Michael and Pacherie's previous study, the phenomenon of commitment is a fundamental component of human social existence. Commitments make people's actions foreseeable in the context of changes in their desires and interests, helping the planning and execution of collective activities involving many people (Michael et al., 2016). As stated by one informant:

“I share my knowledge and wisdom with anyone who approaches me.” (Female Informant 2, Ma’am Tery)

Aside from sharing their talent, wisdom, and knowledge with others, they also did not forget to spend their time with God, whom they considered the center of their lives. In fact, one informant has been dedicated for a long time to serving their chapel and became committed to practicing their religion so as to humbly touch the lives of his fellowmen towards a godly life. He said:

“The happiest thing that happened in my life was that I shared my talents and time in our chapel for more than 25 years of my service as a lay minister.” (Male Informant 5, Uncle Kaabag)

Moreover, one informant intended to make a significant contribution to society because they are motivated to do so by God's grace as they live every day. As remarked:

“My number one inspiration is our Lord God because he is the one who gives blessings so that I can also help others and contribute to the society where I live.” (Female Informant 4, Ma’am Bing)



Good legacy. A person's material possessions, wealth, or achievements do not define a great legacy; these are the only standards to consider. Instead, the unmarried elderly viewed a good legacy in terms of using their virtues to positively impact others around them and empower people who will maintain this endeavor into the future. These groups of individuals exemplify kindness by being good to their neighbors and other people, standing on moral courage, and making an effort not to harm the feelings of other people. With this in mind, they impart their wisdom in the hopes that it will serve as a source of motivation and direction for others, helping them make better decisions in their lives. As revealed in the study of Ouweneel et al. (2014), an act of kindness is any thoughtful action done for the benefit of another person. Interestingly, Curry et al. (2018) asserted that doing acts of kindness has been consistently associated with greater well-being.

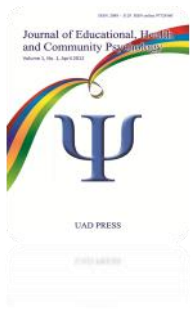
As stated by a couple of the informants:

“I want to be a good example to the people around me.” (Female Informant 4, Ma’am Bing)

“I hope that the knowledge I share with them will be an inspiration or a guide for what they should do in their lives.” (Female Informant 2, Ma’am Tery)

On top of that, some of the informants wanted to be remembered favorably, both for the good deeds they accomplished and the positive relationships they established, even after they leave this world. One of the informants remarked:

“The legacy I left in my work—that they would still remember me for the good things I did and for having a good relationship with me when they needed something and I could help, so I helped.” (Female Informant 1, Auntie Inday)



Helping immediate family/relatives. For the unmarried, being single does not imply total isolation and undivided attention, but rather it allowed them to have more focus on their personal desires and life goals. Along with that was helping their close family and relatives, which meant contributing their resources.

Indeed, our family has a huge impact on the way we act. The study by Hamedanchi et al. (2021) highlights the importance of close relationships with family and friends in overcoming loneliness among never-married elderly individuals. While women in the study benefited from extensive social networks, men often relied more on immediate family connections. A significant aspect of their social engagement involved providing assistance to others, which strengthened societal bonds, added meaning to their lives, and safeguarded their identities against social stigmatization. This desire to help often extended to adopting children whose families could not care for them, demonstrating their commitment to supporting relatives and immediate family.

As a matter of fact, in this study, it is undeniable that societal influences were a potent factor in the lives of the unmarried elderly as it hugely influenced their thoughts and behaviors toward a decision that would impact the course of their lives.

Figure 1. Thematic network of the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly

The figure above summarizes the themes discussed in the previous sections of this study. In general, there are five aspects that contribute to the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly, namely: positive thoughts, positive feelings, triumphs or successes, hopes and/or aspirations, and meaningful reasons for going against social norms.



In positive thoughts, there are three (3) major themes: individual functioning, social functioning, and a secured social network. Individual functioning has five (5) categories, including fewer obligations, freedom and autonomy, exploration and enjoyment, goal-orientedness, and learned qualities. Then, social functioning has four (4) categories, which include interest or desire to do things, a good legacy, helping immediate family or relatives, and helping other people. Next, a secured social network includes three (3) categories: a wholesome environment, family as inspiration, and a circle of friends. In positive feelings, there is only one central theme, which is self-actualization. It is composed of five (5) categories: acceptance, fulfillment, gratitude, authentic happiness, and peace of mind.

For their triumphs or successes, it also emerged with only one main theme: life accomplishments. This main theme consists of four (4) categories, including length of life, accomplishments of immediate family members, service and retirement, and property investment. Furthermore, there is only one major theme for hopes and/or aspirations: quality of life. This major theme includes four (4) categories: faith in God, overcoming life challenges, health and personal care, and good living conditions.

Lastly, the meaningful reasons for breaking social norms have come up with two (2) major themes: predetermination and self-determination. Predetermination has only one category, which is fate and destiny. On the other hand, self-determination has emerged with six (6) categories, namely: personal decision, contentment, loss of interest, work engagement, socioeconomic status, and social influence.

Conclusion

This study entitled “Breaking Social Norms: Lived Stories of the Unmarried Elderly,” was undertaken to unveil the lives of the unmarried elderly in the Southern Philippines. This phenomenological inquiry sought to provide useful information about unmarried elderly people in terms of their happiness and psychological well-being in light of their singlehood. Hence, it served as a tool to help the informants



find meaning in their lives by looking at their well-being in a new light. Furthermore, this study has focused on what is good and positive in their lives based on how they accept and uphold themselves with favorable attitudes toward positive functioning.

The data were gathered through an in-depth interview with ten (10) informants, composed of five unmarried men and five unmarried women. In particular, the researcher of the study addressed the central research question regarding what contributes to the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly, considering that they are single and/or unmarried at their age. Their psychological well-being consists of their positive thoughts, positive feelings, triumphs or successes, hopes or aspirations, and their meaningful or compelling reasons for going against social norms.

After an extensive analysis of the collected data and accounts from the informants and verification of the presented results and discussion, this qualitative study has found the following:

Generally, the informants have truly exemplified favorable attitudes in every aspect of their lives, which enabled them to find their purpose or the real meaning of their lives. Thus, this pleasant regard for life that they had, led them towards positive functioning, which contributes significantly to their psychological well-being.

The informants authentically lived their lives as fully functioning individuals and social beings who are meaningfully connected with others in a safe and secure environment. In relation to this, they function accordingly as being influenced by their positive thoughts of being single and/or unmarried, which includes the significance of their individual functioning, social functioning, and their secured social network. As self-functioning individuals, it entails that they have fewer obligations, freedom and autonomy, exploration and enjoyment, are goal-orientedness, and have learned several qualities as a result of their personal experiences. In addition, their social functioning includes their interest in or



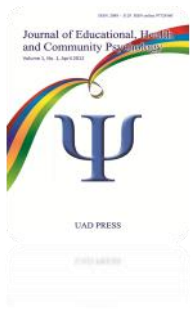
desire to do something, their views on leaving good legacies, helping their immediate family members and/or relatives, and extending a hand to other people, especially those who are needy. Lastly, this group of individuals also functions meaningfully along with their secured social network that includes a wholesome environment, their family as inspirations, and their circle of friends.

Their positive functioning has made them realize their potential and individualities, leading to an authentic appreciation for life. As a result, they became deeply connected with their inner selves, which made them live a truthful life. Thus, they became self-actualized individuals as they recognized the beauty of their lives through realistic and genuine feelings that include acceptance, fulfillment, being grateful, authentic happiness, and peace of mind.

Considerably, these unmarried elderly people were able to attain valuable things throughout their lives as a result of their pursuit of a successful and healthy life. Particularly, this attainment refers to the life accomplishments that gave them a story to be proud of, may it be in their personal lives, careers, or families. These successes or triumphs include their length of life, the accomplishments of their immediate family members, their service and attainment of the retirement period, and their property investment.

Given that these groups of people have been functioning well, there is still hope that keeps them going and allows them to live with a sense of direction and purpose. These hopes allowed them to see things in a positive light and embrace a hopeful endeavor. Furthermore, these hopes significantly include their aspirations for quality of life. This concept includes their faith in God, overcoming life challenges, health and personal care, and hopes for good living conditions.

Importantly, to give more clarity or a deeper understanding of their lives as single and/or unmarried, they provided profound reasons that depicted their meaningful causes and primary motivations that led



them to their current situation. These meaningful reasons mainly consist of two ideas, namely, predetermination and self-determination. Predetermination includes fate and destiny, wherein the informants noted that the course of their lives was predestined or already written in the stars and that they had no power to change it. Moreover, self-determination constitutes their individual freedom and authority to make decisions for themselves and the path that they will take, such that they have the personal decision to choose singlehood for the remainder of their lives because of several reasons, including contentment, loss of interest, being engaged in work, their socioeconomic status, and social influences.

Remarkably, it is evident how their positive thoughts, positive feelings, stories of triumphs and/or successes, strong regard for their hopes and/or aspirations, and meaningful reasons for being single and unmarried have ultimately influenced their psychological well-being.

Implication

Based on the results and discussion, the researcher directed practical implications for the informants of the study, the community and the field of psychology and suggested possible directions for future studies.

Hence, this study is most beneficial to the following: For the unmarried elderly, this study helped equip and raise their healthy sense of well-being, fulfillment, and satisfaction in life by bringing positive emotions to their conscious awareness toward improving their happiness. Thus, this study also showed that they can flourish and thrive in life despite being stereotyped and regarded as a disadvantaged group in terms of personal networks and social well-being.



To the community, the results of this study may help the community become more aware of the lives of the unmarried elderly, thus reducing people's prejudices or stereotypes against their well-being. Through this, one may be able to gain a more realistic perspective on their life and comprehend the truth underlying their aging experience of being unmarried, as well as the reasons why they defy social norms. Moreover, they can develop programs that would address the social needs of the unmarried elderly and that would aid them in developing positive institutions, social duties, civic virtues, nurturance, altruism, respect, acceptance, work ethics, and other characteristics that contribute to the formation of citizenship and communities.

To the field of psychology, the findings of this study are useful in terms of adding to the body of knowledge in the field of positive psychology about the lived experiences of the unmarried elderly, particularly by understanding what contributes to their psychological well-being given their single status. Thus, it provides knowledge about their positive experiences, such as their happiness, well-being, and life satisfaction.

For future researchers, the outcome of this study may be the basis for further studies and can be used as related literature to understand more about the psychological well-being of the unmarried elderly in terms of their singlehood. As a result, this study will provide them with ideas on how to improve and conduct the same study with a broader scope and in a different context.

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Conflict of Interest

The researchers declare that this paper has no conflicts of interest.



Author Contribution

All authors have contributed equally to the study's conceptualization, interpreting data, reviewing, and editing the manuscript.

Data Availability

Data can be provided upon request to the author.

Declarations Ethical Statement

The study followed the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all persons involved in the study.

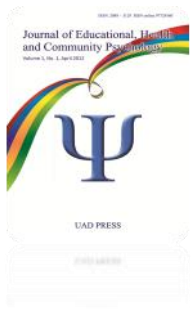
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