

# The Stresses and Coping Reactions of Separated Women: An Exploratory Study

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*The study explored the different stresses and coping reactions of separated women as well as the different phases of marital separation by using the multiple case study method. The in-depth interview was used as the main instrument in the study of seven separated women.*

*Data analysis was done by searching for emerging patterns. Among those found were common patterns in the characteristics of the women and their ex-spouses; the stresses experienced by the women; coping reactions before and after the separation; the characteristics of the marriage itself; and the reasons for their initial efforts to keep the marriage intact. Infidelity was found to be a common problem.*

*Marital separation was found to be a process with several phases. Patterns in the dynamics of the women were discussed, particularly the pattern of emotional abuse as well as the influence of culture and religion. The importance of time and the family of origin contribute to the continuous but slow process of growth and healing.*

**I**t used to be that being a separated woman in the Philippines meant something was "wrong" with oneself for not being able to keep a husband. People looked upon her like a disease or the plague (Licuanan, 1982) avoiding her and talking about her in whispers. They are perceived by men as "easy lay" (Paras, 1983), "fair game" (Ortigas, 1989; Ventura, 1981), and by other women as a "threat" (Licuanan, 1980; Paras, 1983). Nowadays, however, society seems kinder to the separated woman. Although it has not achieved epidemic proportions, separation between the Filipina woman and her husband is not something that needs to be shelved in the family closet anymore.

Records at the National Census and Statistics Office (NSO) show that the number of separation cases has increased more than 100 percent in the last 20 years and more than 50 percent in the last 10 years. In the Catholic Church, likewise, the number of marriage annulment cases filed with the Marriage Tribunal has increased dramatically in the last few years. These increases could probably be attributed to the new Code of Canon Law as well as to the new Family Code of the Philippines. The new Family Code adopted the Canon concerning Matrimonial Consent as Article 36 which stipulates that "psychological incapacity to fulfill the essential marital obligations of marriage" is a ground for marital separation.

By itself, marital separation is a stressful event. Western studies have found that in addition to problems related to finances which always seem to be the most prominent, separated women have to cope with child-rearing and parenting concerns, interpersonal relations, loneliness and social stigma, practical problems and former spouse contacts. Coping strategies usually employed by separated women include social activities, learning new skills, personal understanding, expressing feelings, becoming more independent, and home and family activities.

To date, however, no systematic study has been done on the problems and stresses and coping reactions of separated women in the Philippines.

Thus, this study addresses the following questions:

- (1) What are the stresses and concerns of separated women?
- (2) What coping reactions do they employ?
- (3) What phases do they go through in responding to the marital separation?

## Methodology

### *Sample*

The sample of separated women was limited to those who have been separated from their husbands and who have children. The separation cases were limited to those due to marital difficulties or marital breakdown and not due to military service, overseas work, hospitalization, extended business trips, or imprisonment. The seven respondents were recruited through referrals and asked if they would agree to participate in the research. All the women agreed; they were then assured of utmost confidentiality.

### *Instruments*

*Interview.* The in-depth interview was used by the researcher as the main instrument. It consisted of open-ended questions to allow the respondents to freely expound their answers. Guided by the framework of Santiago and Enriquez (1982) the researcher first tried to establish rapport through *pagtatanung-tanong* and *pakiramdam* until gradually the level of *pakikipagpalagayang-loob* was reached. Two or more interviews were administered to each respondent.

*The Personal Information Sheet.* Because not all the information required by the researcher were gathered in the interviews, a Personal Information Sheet was administered to the women. This instrument required information such as brief family background of the women and their ex-spouses, their respective educational backgrounds, length of courtship and marriage, and data on their children.

*Processing the Process.* Since responses were revealed both in verbal and non-verbal form, effort was thus made to note expressions of feelings in tone of voice, facial expression, and body language as each of the respondents narrated her story. This method is called "processing the process" or noting the effects of the process of retelling their individual stories on the different women in the study.

*The Thematic Apperception Test (TAT).* The TAT was used as a screening device to focus only on the women who did not have any personality problems. Only four of the women were administered the TAT because the three other women were familiar with it, either having administered it or presently administering it in connection with their professions.

*Focus Group Discussions (FGD).* The FGD served as some kind of closure activity for all the processes that the women had undergone in connection with the study. This was organized to give them an opportunity to share their thoughts as a group.

*The Family Genogram.* A genogram is a format for drawing a family tree that records information about family members and their relationships spanning at least three generations (McGoldrich, 1985). Based on the interviews and the personal information sheet, the researcher was able to construct the family genogram of each woman, of her ex-spouse, and of their family.

## **Data Analysis**

The demographic data was first organized according to the following types: the profile of the separated women; the profile of their ex-spouses; the profile of the children; the profile of the marriage. Other data were arranged in chronological order starting with the problem period in the marriage, the period before the separation, and finally, the period after the separation. Data were then grouped according to issues and concerns of the separated woman pertaining to marital separation; effects of the separation on the person of the separated woman; and lastly, related issues and concerns after the separation.

From all the data gathered, emerging patterns were then extracted referring to more prevalent and more common factors among all the women.

## **Results**

Results were presented in chronological order to easily show the growth that these women experienced. Data were divided into 10 sections and presented in 33 tables and 26 figures.

Demographic data were arranged first showing the profiles of the women, the ex-spouses and the children; the comparative family backgrounds of the women and the ex-spouses; and the profile of the marriage.

The second section dealt with the problems in the marriage; the types of problems and their attributions; the atmosphere in the home prior to the separation, and the events which triggered the separation termed "the last straw".

Section three presented the matters in connection with the period before the separation such as the thoughts and feelings of the separated woman about herself, about her ex-spouse, the stresses she experienced and the coping responses she used before the separation.

The fourth section included data related to the stresses experienced and the coping responses used before the separation as well as the types and sources of support received. In addition, the three stages of coping reactions undergone by the separated woman were also included.

Issues and concerns of the separated woman with regard to marital separation were collected under the fifth section. These issues covered her thoughts, feelings and attitudes toward the separation; the advantages of the separation for her; and her thoughts and feelings toward the ex-spouse after the separation.

Section six comprised of the effects of the separation on the person of the separated woman. These included her present thoughts and feelings about herself; her personal needs and wants; and her present concerns and worries. In addition it also included her insights, reflections and learnings from the experience; her wishes, dreams and plans; her thoughts and attitudes toward new relationships; and some homespun advice for other women.

The seventh section dealt with other related issues and concerns of the separated woman after the separation such as the present living arrangements which were made clearer graphically with genogram illustrations; whether there was any contact at all with the ex-spouse and the former in-laws by the woman and the children; information on financial arrangements and support as well as data on the present status of her marriage, that is, whether arrangements have been made to change her status either with the church or civil authorities.

The activities and preoccupations engaged in by the women at the time of the study comprised the eighth section while section nine revealed the effects of the various methods employed in the study.

The seven case studies were presented in narrative form in the tenth section.

## Discussion

An enormous wealth of data had been gathered in the course of making this study. Seemingly extraneous data, however, were incorporated in the discussion due to the researcher's conviction that they likewise contributed to a better and broader understanding of the dynamics of separated women. This study, therefore, attempted to cluster the findings under topics which, from the researcher's viewpoint, are relevant and supportive of its purposes.

### *Patterns in the Characteristics of the Women*

At the time of their wedding all the women agreed that they were naive, young and inexperienced. They had hardly established their own identity when they plunged into a relationship and had to assume an identity as "half of a couple". In addition they all seemed to have "stars in their eyes" during the courtship period, which at most was two years, such that the lure of romance seemed to have blurred their vision to realities like the spouse's closeness to his mother, an issue which would be the source of their problem later. A common factor was the fact that these women grew up in traditional families and had sheltered childhood. All the women married their first boyfriends and most harbored the "wrong reasons" for marrying. Lastly, they all had false expectations of the marriage as well as false expectations of their future spouses.

### *Patterns in the Characteristics of the Ex-spouses*

The quality of the upbringing of the ex-spouses emerged as a common factor among the respondents, specifically the fact that the women "blamed" the ex-spouses' mother to be responsible for the ex-spouse's behavior and attitudes. Another common factor was that the ex-spouses were now in their forties or what Sheehy (1979) calls the "Age 40 Crucible". Lastly, the women were of the opinion that their ex-spouses had some type of personality disorder.

### *Patterns in the Stresses of the Separated Women*

Five of the seven women in the study cited infidelity as the main problem in their marriage. An interesting finding however was that there was a difference in the stresses and feelings of the women before the separation from those feelings and stresses after the separation. Whereas before the separation all the stresses felt by the women had something to do with their personal feelings and reactions and were directed inward, dur-

ing the period following separation, the stresses they felt were more external in nature and were directed outward.

### *Patterns in the Coping Reactions of the Separated Women*

Some similarities emerged in the coping reactions of the women before and after the separation. Reliance on prayer and deep faith in God as a source of hope emerged as the foremost coping response. Family support affirmed the Filipino's close family ties while consulting friends and professionals was also resorted to. Physical reactions in the form of various aches and sicknesses were a common manifestations of the stresses these women experienced. Creative ways of channeling their stresses were also found such as pursuing graduate studies.

After the separation, however, although some coping reactions were maintained, new types of coping reactions were learned. The women made efforts to reach out and meet people who were neither family nor friends and interacted with them in creative and useful ways such as becoming active members of clubs and organizations.

The study confirmed the framework Ortigas (1989) used for newly separated individuals in coping with marital separation, namely: shock and denial; anger and depression; grieving and mourning; acceptance and understanding; recovery and growth; and, finally, the outreach stage.

An interesting finding was that there were no prescriptions nor rituals either in the culture or the society in general on how separated women should undergo the transition from being married to being separated.

### *Patterns in the Marriage*

Five of the seven women confessed that infidelity was the cause of their marital woes. There seemed to be a relationship between the infidelity or womanizing by the ex-spouse and his closeness to his own mother. All the women initiated the separation and all the children stayed with them after the separation. Common reasons why the women tried to keep the marriage intact were financial reasons; their own personal needs; and their eternal hope that things will change for the better.

Contrary to popular speculation, marital separation is not a single or solitary event. It was found to be a process with four phases, the problem period; the last straw; the separation proper; and finally, the post-separation phase.

Many and varied are the forces challenging the institution of marriage today. Thus conscious effort has to be made to nurture the love between a married couple constantly and continually by certain manifestations of affection and caring. Without this constant effort and struggle, love can die a natural death.

### *Patterns in the Dynamics of the Women*

All the women admitted that they felt they were victims of emotional abuse. Filipino culture seemed to reinforce the stereotype that women need to be dependent and to avoid independence. Ironically, religion which seemed to be their anchor, likewise appeared to reinforce this stereotype by condoning "suffering in silence" or the Martyr Complex.

However, marital separation seemed to have jolted these women from their lethargy. It awakened them from their dependence to realize that they have their own individual identities. They now felt a sense of empowerment and this sense of achievement and competence permeated the other areas of their lives. "Seeds beneath the snow" is used as a fitting metaphor for these women, meaning that all along they had the potential to grow as persons but that they had been conditioned by culture, society and religion to play the passive role.

### *Other Related Issues*

More than half of marital separations involve children and while it ends the role of spouse it does not end the role of parenting. Thus it may generate problems in the children as they are extremely sensitive to parental separation which can be painful and damaging to them.

Under the issue of custody and visitation, the following are briefly discussed: the issue of discipline; the danger of putting the children in a "spying" position; and "parentification" or giving them adult responsibility. Hiring and training proper caretakers as well as choosing appropriate role models are suggested. Most of all, "giving the children a handle" or explaining to them what really happened between the parents should not be overlooked.

The importance of the women's family of origin as an invaluable source of support during the period of separation cannot be overestimated. The passage of time as vital factor in the healing, recovery and growth of these women was likewise found to be important although this process can be very slow and irregular.



## Suggestions for Further Research

Being a relatively new area, research on marital separation in the Philippines can be further pursued along these lines:

- (1) studies on the dynamics of separated men and children of separated parents;
- (2) studies on the dynamics of the marital relationship for a more wholistic approach to the issue of marital separation;
- (3) studies on the dynamics of separated women from other socio-economic strata;
- (4) studies on separated women with young and very young children;
- (5) studies on women not supported by their family of origin;
- (6) studies on separated women as victims of physical violence;
- (7) studies on types of probable causes of marital breakdown;
- (8) studies on possible rites and rituals for marital separation.

In summary, the separated woman goes through a series of problems and stresses uniquely her own and copes with them through familiar modes learned from her culture and religion. However, she learns alternative and creative ways of coping and in the process grows to be an independent and mature person.

Many more issues have not been dealt with in connection with marital separation. Rather than respond to these issues, this study may have generated more questions than it has answered. At best what this study may have accomplished is to arouse interest and concern on the many issues surrounding marital separation in general and the separated Filipina in particular.

Thus the principal role of this study may have been more to initiate and stimulate research in the area rather than provide ready-made solutions or explanations to the problems of separated women in the Philippines.

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