

Explaining the Experiences of the Elderly After the Death of a Spouse: A Content Analysis

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Abstract

Background: Aging is a critical period of human life during which the elderly experience many losses. Difficult problems facing the elderly such as the loss of a loved one can be very stressful. Identifying the resilience factors of the elderly in this regard provides a clear path to achieving the concept of “successful elderly”. Accordingly, the present study aimed to explain the experiences of the elderly who have lost their spouse.

Methods: This study was conducted qualitatively using a content analysis approach. To collect data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 24 elderly people who were selected through purposive sampling. Data analysis was performed according to the model proposed by Graneheim and Lundman. The accuracy and robustness of the data were also assessed based on Lincoln and Guba’s criteria.

Results: Three main categories including *the purgatory of separation*, *manifestation of interests*, and *on the way to resilience* were extracted from the findings that can explain the experiences of the elderly who lost their spouse in the specific sociocultural context of Iran.

Conclusion: The findings of the study reflected both positive and negative experiences affecting the elderly and emphasized the need for effective strategies to improve the situation according to the sociocultural conditions of Iran. Therefore, it is necessary for the elderly, their family members, and society as social capital to change attitudes and provide appropriate facilities while meeting the emotional, psychological, social, and economic needs of the elderly and considering their right to independence and empowerment.

Keywords: Content analysis, Elderly, Experience, Death of spouse

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Introduction

Couples play an important supportive role in life and they can improve the quality of their partner’s life by participating in certain activities such as daily care and spiritual support (1). For every person, the death of a spouse is one of the most difficult and destructive life events that causes stress and negative tensions (2). For many seniors, changing from a married person to a widowed due to the death of a spouse is considered one of the most difficult changes in life (3). About 31% of women aged 74 to 65 years are widows, which reaches 80% in those at the age of 85 and older. Moreover, 9% of men aged 65 to 74 years are widowers, which increases to 47% at the age of 85 and older (4). In Iran, statistics show that about 8% of elderly men and 48% of elderly women are widowed. In other words, one of every two elderly Iranian women has lost her husband (5). Widowed men and women are among the most vulnerable groups in

society as the loss of a spouse can lead to grief, financial hardship, and depression (3). The widowed are exposed to severe mental disorders about 9 times more than married people, with about 50% of the widowed suffering from depression in the first year of widowhood (6). Studies in the United Kingdom and other European countries showed that adapting to the death of a spouse is more difficult for men than women and depression and emotional stress are more likely in men than women (7). Furthermore, women are more financially and economically stressed after the death of their husbands (8, 9). Widowhood is also greatly influenced by cultural conditions and gender (10). For example, in some cultures and societies, remarriage of widowed women, especially older women is deemed inappropriate. Thus, this coercion imprisons elderly women in unprotected and unfavorable conditions. In contrast, remarriage conditions are usually easier for men (11). In Asian



countries such as India, China, and Japan, the widowed are exposed to neglect, sexual harassment, and violence (12). On the other hand, most of the people who lose their spouse continue to live with their spouse's family and in many cases, they are considered burdensome in these families (13). A study conducted by Perkins et al. in India showed that older men and women who lose their spouses are more likely to consume alcohol, tobacco, and drugs than married elderly (14). The widowed also experience changes in their diet and eating habits as a result of losing their spouse. They report a decrease in appetite due to loneliness and lack of pleasure. These people usually have an improper diet due to a reduction of home food consumption, which especially in the elderly leads to weight loss and body mass reduction (15). The death of a spouse increases the disease, disability, and mortality of survivors (16). About 30% of the widowed die shortly after the death of their spouse, with this occurring in men more than in women (17). The causes of death are very diverse, including accidents, violence, and alcohol consumption, but suicide is among the most common causes. For instance, in Denmark, most elderly people who commit suicide are widowed (18). In addition to the negative effects on a person's emotions, the death of a spouse has other consequences. One of these consequences is the survivor's sense of freedom. In fact, the surviving people feel more independent and capable than in the past, and they also feel calm and comfortable. The reason for this feeling is that the surviving people get free from the coercion of cohabitation and they do not have a spouse to limit them anymore. As a result, they can participate in activities that they were previously unable to do due to the caring responsibility for their spouse (19). Widowed men and women react to the death of their spouse in different ways and gradually gain resilience to the problems and grief caused by the loss of a spouse (20). Moreover, the role of the family is undeniable in how to deal with and accept this event. Living with children after the death of a spouse can reduce the painful burden of the event, financial stress, and depression among the widowed (21). A study by Powers et al. also showed that the supportive role of family members for the widowed was effective in improving their sense of well-being (22). Today, with the increasing population of the elderly, the concept of successful aging has attracted the attention of researchers and policymakers. Since the death of a spouse and loneliness are common in the widowed and have a great impact on various aspects of their lives, there is an urgent need to address the various dimensions of losing a spouse in the elderly which have not been studied adequately in Iran. Therefore, the present study aimed to investigate human experiences regarding the death of a spouse, its consequences, and the process of resilience in the elderly widowed. Meanwhile, through accurate exploration and understanding of experiences, qualitative

research can assess the various dimensions of people's attitudes and examine mental phenomena better and more deeply than quantitative studies (23). Qualitative research is a suitable way to achieve clear and transparent research goals by collecting comprehensive and holistic findings. The purpose of a qualitative study is to provide true and tangible descriptions of a real situation (24); thus, the use of a qualitative method in this study seemed more desirable. Accordingly, the present study adopted a qualitative method with a content analysis approach to explain the experiences of the elderly who have lost their spouse in the east of Guilan province, Iran.

Methods

The present study was a qualitative one conducted using a content analysis approach. According to Downe-Wambolt, Bengtsson has defined content analysis as "a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena" (25). In this qualitative study, the study population included all the elderly widowed in the east of Guilan province. The samples were selected using purposive sampling method with maximum diversity in terms of gender, age, educational status, and socioeconomic status. All elderly were at the age of 60 and older who had experienced the death of their spouse in the past year and had no cognitive impairment such as Alzheimer's disease, dementia and delirium, deafness, and severe hearing loss. Before each interview, the objectives of the study, the possibility of withdrawing from the collaboration at any time during the research, as well as the reason for recording conversations were explained to the participants, and they were assured of the confidentiality of their personal information and specifications. The method of this study was selected according to the main question and the general and overall purpose of the research. The main question addressed in the study was: "What is the experience of the elderly after the death of a spouse?" and the overall goal was to "explain the experience of the elderly after the death of a spouse". Data were collected through semi-structured and face-to-face interviews. One of the researchers conducted all the interviews and the process of data collection continued until deep and sufficient data were obtained and information saturation was achieved i.e., to the point where no new information was obtained. The elderly living in the nursing homes were interviewed at the nursing home, and interviews with other elderly were conducted at the referral place, such as the Retirement Organization. The interviews with those meeting the criteria for enrollment in the study were conducted at the place and time determined by the participants. First, the elderly introduced themselves, and then the duration of the widowhood and the cause of

death of their spouse were asked. Each interview began with an open-ended question, such as “Would you please share your experience of the death of your spouse?” which was followed by probing questions such as, “Can you explain more?” The interviews were recorded by a voice recorder after giving signed permission. At the end of each interview, to extract the relevant keywords and codes and related processing, the conversation on the tape recorder was re-heard and all words were transcribed precisely. Accordingly, both data collection and analysis were performed at the same time (26). Data were analyzed according to the steps proposed by Graneheim and Lundman. The interviews were conducted by the researchers and were read several times to get an understanding of the current situation. All interviews were considered as a unit of analysis. Then, words, sentences, or paragraphs were considered as semantic units. Semantic units are a set of words and sentences that are related to the same content. These units were summarized according to their content and placed along with each other. Then, the semantic units reached the level of conceptualization and were named with specific codes. Afterward, the codes were compared with each other in terms of similarities and differences and classified under more abstract categories with specific labels. Finally, by comparing the classes with each other, and profound and accurate reflection, the content hidden in the data was introduced under the title of the study theme. To ensure the robustness of the data, the 4-item criteria presented by Lincoln and Guba including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were used (27-29). To confirm the credibility, after processing the interviews and determining the initial codes, the obtained information was provided to the participants to confirm the consistency and conformity of the findings with their experiences. The dependability was ensured by reviewing the obtained texts by three expert colleagues in qualitative studies to confirm the accuracy of the data processing and analysis. The confirmability of the study was approved by preserving documents and audio files in all stages of the research, besides using the opinions of faculty members (29). To improve transferability, purposive sampling was used and the participants’ quotations were presented directly to broaden research applications in other fields (30).

To comply with ethical considerations, at the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was informed about the objective of the study, the reason for recording the interviews, the confidentiality of data, the deletion of data after extraction of results, the freedom to voluntarily withdraw from the study, the safety of participation in the study, the voluntary participation in the research, the possibility to opt out of the research, and the possibility of having access to research results. Besides, informed consent was obtained from all participants for

participation and interview recording.

Results

The participants in the present study were 24 elderly people who had lost their spouse in the past year. A total of 17 females and 9 males with the age range of 60 to 78 years participated in the study (Table 1). According to the statements of the interviewees, 3 main categories and 10 subcategories were extracted. The main categories included *the purgatory of separation* with the related subcategories as bubble convergence, rising of saying yes, the last spark of welfare, and the ominous shadow of death, *manifestation of interests* with the subcategories including late renaissance, improved independence, and parallel disburden, and *on the way to resilience* with the subcategories as pleasant faithfulness, roaming in spirituality, and emotional simulation (Table 2).

Table 1. The participants’ demographic characteristics

Participant No.	Age	Gender	Education
1	60	Female	High school
2	64	Male	Diploma
3	63	Male	Diploma
4	68	Male	Diploma
5	66	Female	BSc
6	67	Male	Primary school
7	71	Male	Illiterate
8	72	Female	Primary school
9	73	Male	Illiterate
10	68	Female	Illiterate
11	69	Male	Diploma
12	75	Male	BSc
13	63	Male	Primary school
14	66	Female	Illiterate
15	62	Female	High school
16	69	Male	BSc
17	72	Female	Diploma

Table 2. Categories and subcategories extracted from the experiences of the elderly after the death of a spouse

Main categories	Subcategories
The purgatory of separation	Bubble convergence
	Rising of saying yes
	The last spark of welfare
	The ominous shadow of death
Manifestation of interests	Late renaissance
	Improved independence
	Parallel disburden
On the way to resilience	Pleasant faithfulness
	Roaming in spirituality
	Emotional simulation

Theme 1: The purgatory of separation

According to the elderly, widowhood was associated with unpleasant consequences in their individual and family life.

Bubble convergence

Most of the participants complained about being neglected by their children and family after widowhood and felt upset. They stated that the family's negligence after a short period of attention had doubled their widowhood grief. Widowed men, more than women, expressed regret for the family's negligence. "Early after my wife's death, one of my grandchildren came every week and stayed with me overnight, and they did my work if I had something to do. But now, after only two months, they have gone", said an elderly man (Participant 2).

Rising of saying yes

Some of the widowed spoke of losing their decision-making power and independence as a disadvantage of widowhood. "Since I lost my husband, I have done almost everything I used to do, now my children do not allow me to do them, and it has made me feel worthless" (Participant 14).

The last spark of welfare

Participants made comparative statements about their economic situation before and after widowhood, and they complained about the lack of financial support from family members. Widowhood has even had a negative effect on the quality of nutrition and physical health of the elderly widowed. A man said, "After my wife's death, I was not in a good financial situation and this affected my diet severely" (Participant 9).

The ominous shadow of death

Some elderly widowed spoke of the nervous and frightening effects of their spouse's death, calling it the most horrific experience in their lives. "It is very difficult to suddenly lose someone you have lived with for 60 years. Hard times that my husband spent in the last days of his life, and his fear of death in the last minutes of his life, which was evident from his behavior, have become my nightmare and made me very frightened of death", a woman said (Participant 8).

Theme 2: Manifestation of interests

Some elderly people talked about the positive aspects of widowhood in their lives and reminded that widowhood had good consequences for their lives.

Late renaissance

According to some seniors, widowhood provided a way for them to do pleasurable things and improved the quality of their life. An elderly woman said, "I often gave up on having the things that I liked because it was not what

my husband wanted. For example, I always wanted to learn reading and writing, but whenever my granddaughter came to teach me, my husband became angry and he did not allow me to do it. Now, I have the opportunity to read and write at least before my death" (Participant 10).

Improved independence

Some elderly referred to enhanced personality traits and the ability to solve problems as positive consequences of widowhood. One participant said, "Before, I thought I could not manage my life without my wife, but as I did various things in her absence, I realized that I was moving forward with everything in my life and my personality was getting stronger" (Participant 11).

Parallel disburden

The widowed mentioned the positive mutual aspects that the death of their spouse had for them and of their deceased spouse, saying that death was not always an unpleasant and distressing phenomenon. "My wife was always sick, she was afraid and always preferred to die healthy. This happened, she passed away when she was not very sick, and at the last moment, she said the same thing to me and expressed her happiness", a man said (Participant 16).

Theme 3: On the way to resilience

To adapt to the death of their spouse and the phenomenon of widowhood, the elderly used resilience as a model for their lives, which led to better tolerance of the situation.

Pleasant faithfulness

Some seniors expressed pleasant faithfulness as a way to cope with widowhood. According to them, being loyal to their spouse even after their death reduced their unhappiness and gave them a sense of well-being. A woman said, "I still use my wedding ring and it is nice to see this ring on my finger. The reason I kept the ring is that firstly I feel that I still belong to my husband and secondly, I indirectly show this to those who may be looking for a wife for their widowed father" (Participant 5).

Roaming in spirituality

The widowed elderly found their usual religious and spiritual practices effective in gaining resilience during widowhood. One of the elderly said, "Praying, pilgrimage, and religious ceremonies that strengthen the remembrance of God, make me better able to understand what happened, to cope with this loneliness and difficult circumstances, and manage my fear of the possibility of death" (Participant 12).

Emotional simulation

Some participants stated that repeating some of the things that their spouse did and enjoyed while alive would calm them down and increase their resilience. Furthermore,

doing joint activities that evoke common pleasant memories of the couples was mentioned as another method to strengthen the resilience of the widowed. An elderly man said, “*My wife loved buying fruit and vegetables with me. She always said that wandering in the fruit sellers’ market and the smell of fruit and vegetables made her feel good. Sometimes, even if I do not need fruit and vegetables, I go to the fruit market to feel better*” (Participant 6).

Discussion

The present qualitative study was conducted to explain the resilience structure of the elderly in the face of the experience of the loss of a spouse.

The purgatory of separation

In the present study, *the purgatory of separation* was one of the main categories, with the sub-categories including bubble convergence, rising of saying yes, the last spark of welfare, and the ominous shadow of death. Developing interaction with compatibility, empathy, and calmness can provide a sense of self-confidence, encouragement, and hope in the elderly (31).

Bubble convergence

Being neglected by family members and children after widowhood was one of the major experiences of the elderly in this period. Various studies show that lack of attention, lack of love, humiliation, and unrealistic expectations are not only a form of abuse but also cause despair and hopelessness, feelings of being a burden on others and incompetence, and low self-esteem in the elderly (32, 33). In the experimental studies conducted by Vaezi et al. and Heravi et al., emotional negligence was the most common factor in the elderly and rejection was the least common (33,34).

Rising of saying yes

The participants described the loss of independence and decision-making power as a disadvantage of widowhood. However, for some elderly, independent performance and lack of financial and physical dependence on others in daily life activities are related to health and being healthy. The most important issues in promoting the health of the elderly and maintaining their dignity are related to having independence in physical activities and continuing life actively (35). In the study by Bagheri-Nesami et al., elderly women expressed the death of their husbands, loneliness, lack of male support, feelings of powerlessness, and depression as consequences of reducing the sense of liberty and respect (36).

The last spark of welfare

In the present study, the elderly complained about the lack of financial support from family members during

widowhood and the impact of unfavorable economic conditions on their nutritional status and physical health. A study in India on financial support for the widowed showed that widowhood is associated with reduced opportunities for jobs and income levels (37). In contrast, a study by Wells on the elderly in New York demonstrated that income levels are inversely related to elderly resilience (38).

The ominous shadow of death

The elderly expressed that they used medical treatment to release themselves from the fear of death when they were alone. Considering the experience of death anxiety following the death of a spouse in the elderly, although various studies have confirmed anxiety in the elderly (28,39,40), limited research has specifically addressed the relationship between widowed resilience and death anxiety. Ghufuran et al. showed a significant difference between death anxiety in people who lost their spouse and those whose spouse was alive (41).

Manifestation of interests

Another main category identified in this study was *manifestation of interests*, with the sub-categories including late renaissance, improved independence, and parallel disburden. The importance of loss is related to people’s understanding of the loss experience. Several important factors on the importance of loss include the importance of the individual, the degree of change resulting from the loss, and personal beliefs and values (41).

Late renaissance

Some participants saw the death of their spouse as a threshold point in overcoming the forced conditions and restrictions of married life. Personality competence (such as self-confidence, independence, dominance, and perseverance), self-acceptance, life adaptability, flexibility, and a balanced outlook on life are all components of resilience that are useful in the face of important life events such as the loss of a spouse (42).

Improved independence

After the death of a spouse, the widowed undesirably see themselves in a situation where they have to make independent decisions. Thus, the elderly’s ability to solve problems improves gradually and this promotes satisfaction, the sense of being worthy, and dignity, which in turn is associated with an increase in the quality of life of the elderly (35).

Parallel disburden

In general, self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, the ability and power to pursue desires and actions based on personal principles, even if they are contrary to social customs and demands, having goals that give

direction and meaning to one's life, personal growth, and dominance on the environment (ability to regulate and manage life affairs, especially everyday life issues) are factors effective in the well-being of the elderly and their psychological adjustment (43).

On the way to resilience

Resilience is defined as the successful adaptation to adverse conditions (44). In the widowed, resilience is a short-term reaction to the grief of losing a spouse and is a long-term response to widowhood. In a study by Nath, it was found that the widowed used a variety of mechanisms to strengthen resilience, such as strengthening faith and spirituality, accepting reality, and positive thinking (20).

Pleasant faithfulness

The participants remained faithful to the deceased after their death, which they said reduced their discomfort and gave them a sense of well-being. Lack of interest in remarriage and a sense of commitment to the ex-spouse seem to be the most important reasons for this decision (45).

Roaming in spirituality

The use of spiritual and religious practices such as prayer and pilgrimage were among the strategies used by the elderly to successfully adapt to the new conditions. Religious beliefs improve the meaning and purpose of life, a sense of belonging to a sublime source, and hope for God's help in difficult life situations. In general, religion has an effective role in all aspects of life, such as situation assessment, self-cognition, confrontation activities, and support resources (46). The study by Azami et al. also confirmed the positive effect of religious activities in increasing the level of resilience of the elderly (47).

Emotional simulation

Some participants continued to do mutual work with their spouse after their death to evoke their mutual pleasant memories, and they cited this as a way of resilience. Remembering the past life seems to be a kind of consolation for the survivor. In the study by Haight et al., the way of remembering the past life among the elderly living in nursing homes was effective in improving the quality of life and helping to move to the next stage of life (48).

Among the limitations of the present study was that data were collected only from the participants in the east of Guilan province, Iran due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, some elderly still suffered from remembering their memories and sometimes had little cooperation, to overcome which the researcher tried to change the interview time and convince them to participate in the study by using communication skills.

Conclusion

The experiences of the elderly after the death of their

spouse were explained in the present study as reflected by three main categories including *the purgatory of separation, the manifestation of interests, and on the way to resilience*. The findings of the study showed both positive and negative experiences affecting the resilience structure of the elderly and identified effective strategies to improve the resilience structure in terms of the sociocultural conditions of the society. Therefore, the authorities, those in charge of planning for improving the quality of the life of the elderly, families, and society need to change their attitude to provide appropriate facilities for meeting the emotional, psychological, social, and economic needs of the elderly as well as their independence right, and also accept their ability as a form of social capital. It is suggested that due to the lack of adequate research on the experiences of the elderly after the death of a spouse in different cultures, future studies be conducted using other methods to collect more comprehensive data.

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Authors' Contribution

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Competing Interests

Neither the authors nor the organizations involved have any potential conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval

This study was conducted as part of a research project approved by the Vice Chancellor for Research and Technology and the Ethics Committee of Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Rasht, Iran, under code IR. GUMS. REC. 1399.266.

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