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# Exploring the Grieving Process and Coping Strategies of Meranao Mothers over their Children's Death

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## Abstract

Death of one's child is an unfathomable painful situation that a mother may feel. While literature reports different coping strategies across cultures, there has no research yet that explored the grieving process that Meranao mothers go through when they lost a child. Hence, this study explored the grieving process of the bereaved Meranao mothers from the Southern Philippines over the loss of their children and the strategies they used to cope with the feelings of grief. The study was conducted at different barangays located in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, Philippines. The participants lost children with age range of 18-30 years old. It was discovered that these bereaved mothers ask several questions to themselves emerging after the death of their children. Nonetheless, it was found that after the mothers had worked through their grief brought by their child's death, they were able to restore their life and become stronger and resilient individuals. This paper concludes that bereaved mothers go through a tedious journey wherein the existence of pain, longing, sadness, guilt and anger were felt, but these emotions only strengthen them as mothers.

**Keywords:** Child's Death, Grief, Loss, Bereaved Mother, Grieving Process

## 1. Introduction

The death of a child is one of the worst and crucial moments in a parent's life. It is a life-changing event that shudders every parent (Doka, 2016). Between both the parents, the mother is the one greatly affected by these unwanted circumstances. Mothers have a higher percentage of acquiring negative effects than those of the father after the death of a child (Youngblut, et al., 2013). Death can trigger an intense feeling of disturbance, anxiety or stress to the mother. However, the effects are not only evident through the psychological aspect of the person but also manifested physiologically (Murphy, Shevlin & Elklit, 2014). Exhaustion, body pains, breathing problems and loss of appetite are just some of the physical changes that may occur due to grief (Curie, 2014).

Grief is an emotional and usual response or reaction often due to the death of a loved one (Rainer, 2013). It is a very subjective process wherein people grieve differently. Every individual has his or her own way of grieving;

some may grieve for a long period of time while some may grieve for only a couple of months or a year and some may grieve more intense than others (American Cancer Society, 2016).

There are several types of grief and it can be classified as (1) nonfinite grief or the grief for lost aspiration and plan; (2) ambiguous loss or the grief which is brought by uncertain reason for one's disappearance or death; (3) anticipatory grief or the grief that may occur even before the death or loss of someone; (4) normal grief which is accompanied by emotional or physical response that is normal for grieving individuals; (5) traumatic grief or the grief brought by the sudden, unexpected or tragic death of a person; and (6) complicated grief which is a persistent and more extreme kind of grief which limits one from doing certain activities (Michael, 2015). In this state of loss, the mother's ability to function is greatly reduced as symptoms of grief consume all areas of her life: cognitive dysfunction, physical symptoms, as well as the constant emotional turmoil. Although physical symptoms of grief such as insomnia, nausea, fatigue are common in many losses, in maternal grief such symptoms are more frequent, intense, and long lasting that may last several years, decreasing slowing in intensity over time. The loss of a child has been associated with higher morbidity and mortality (Tan, 2016).

Normal grief enables one to cope with a healthy manner, grief that deviates from normal behavior, grief that occurs prior to the actual loss like in an illness, or disease, grief after the death of a family member because of substance abuse, and one that hides because the loss is socially unacceptable, and grief is caused by natural or man-made circumstances (Tronetti, 2015). Yet people cope differently in countless ways that there is no certain pattern to grieving or they may spend different lengths of time in each stage. After the death of a child, some parents may feel nothing at all. It seems that numbness overpowers the immense emotions caused by the situation.

Death is a natural occurrence that no one can prevent or change. It causes pain and other emotional responses that might have varying degrees of impact on an individual (Ronel & Lebel, 2006). The reason why it is important to conduct a study that will explore the grieving process of mothers who lost their children is to find ways or interventions to help them to cope. Many similar studies have been undertaken in the western world; however, due to the variations in culture and environment that these mothers have, as well as the therapies available to them, it is necessary to conduct a separate study. Though western cultural traditions have affected various mourning theories, several concepts are inapplicable to other cultures, according to a study by Poxon (2013). Furthermore, different cultures prepare people to react differently to the death of a loved one, resulting in grieving that differs from culture to culture. It's also worth noting that psychiatrists and/or psychologists play a bigger role in Western countries than they do in the Philippines. In 2013, the Philippine Psychiatric Association reported that there were only 450 psychiatrists in the country. When it comes to mental health in the Philippines, Filipinos prefer to confide in friends rather than professional therapists if they have a problem, whether serious or not (Buan, 2013). This modest function of mental health practitioners in the Philippines could potentially play a role in how bereaved people deal with their grief.

This present study examines the grieving process and coping strategies of Meranao mothers who experienced grief and loss over the deaths of their children. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research questions: 1) What is the grieving process the mother had been through? 2) What are the effects of the child's death on the mother? And 3) What is the coping mechanism and adjustment process of the mother?

## **2. Method**

This study utilized a case study design. Due to the similarities of the respondents in a particular quantifier, the researchers considered the study as a multiple-case study. The study employed a qualitative research design to explore the mother's grief deeply over the child's death and other reactions related to it. The research method used in the study was a semi-structured in-depth interview.

In gathering the data relevant to the study, the researchers constructed semi-structured interview guide questions to explore the participants' grieving process, placing emphasis on the effects of the child's death and their coping

strategies. These interview questions were adapted from the study “Mean-making in bereaved parents: Process outcome” by Suzanne Lister (2005) checked by experts to ensure the construction and level of sensitivity of the questions asked.

### The Respondents and Ethical Considerations

Purposive sampling technique was used in selecting the participants. Only four mothers whose deceased child was 18-30 years old agreed and gave consent to be part of the study. as the biography chosen was based on the age of the child when he/she died. For ethical considerations, they were all offered a choice of interview location but all opted for the privacy at their own homes. Respondents’ right to autonomy and principle of respect is protected through informed consent. The participants were reminded that their participation is voluntary and they are given the right to withdraw from the study. The participants were informed about the nature of the study and the degree of potential harm.

After conducting the interviews, the researchers transcribed the recorded interview data and noted the non-verbal expressions and behaviors of the respondents. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify and organize the data set into themes that created the interpretation of the cause of the phenomena. Moreover, it helped the researchers find the similarities and differences of the respondents’ individual perspectives.

## **3. Findings and Discussion**

The analysis of the results, and the interpretation of the data gathered were based on the objectives of the study: grieving process, effects of loss, and coping strategies of the bereaved mothers due to the death of their young adult children. Presented below are the findings of the thematic analysis extracted from the transcribed interviews.

### *3.1 Grieving Process*

This comprises the process of the bereaved mothers due to the death of their children, which is divided into four parts: (a) questioning self and others, (b) recollection of memories, (c) visualizations, and (d) acceptance of fate.

#### 3.1.1 Questioning self and others

Question of “How can this possibly be” turns into “why did this happen to my child?” The inconceivable must have a rhyme and reason. Random chance explanations offer no comfort, but rather mocks that life that was so sacred. The why-me question easily transformed into self-pity. Feeling the intense pain of loss can almost be impossible to separate from feeling sympathy for oneself. Most of the respondents ask questions to themselves like- “Sometimes, I ask myself why is my fate turned out like this? I am not the type of mother who abuses or do bad stuff to my child. I do not even curse or utter bad words to them because I even spoiled them a lot?” People live in the world where the parents should outlive their children but when the children outlive their parents, the parents begin to question themselves. Most people look for someone to blame and this is redirected to other things, even to themselves. This is necessary for the grieving process, the more the bereaved persons feel angry towards other people, the more they will release the pain they are feeling and, in some ways, will gradually heal over time (Bulman, 2006).

#### 3.1.2 Recollection of memories

One of the hardest things in losing a child is remembering the memories the deceased left for the living family especially when they see their personal belongings. Even the child was not there anymore, the mothers still cherish the possessions of their children. Accordingly, the things left are what reminded the living of the departed ones (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). In the following section, two subthemes that informed how the mother recollected her memories were described. These are the characteristics of child and the unacceptable death of child.

### Characteristics of child

From the memories and remembrances left by the deceased children, the mothers cannot help but feel remorse to the potential lost and the what-could-have-been of their children, especially when the child showed good attitude and values when he/she was alive. These maybes have been realized because they start acknowledging the absence of their child. For Mommy A, she reminisced her child by saying good characters about him like- “I can tell that he was my kindest child. I’ve got no worries from him; he really loves his siblings.”

### Unacceptable death

Like post-traumatic stress, the loss of a child is inconceivable. One is stunned, immobilized, catatonic with shock. The death of a life one has given with one’s own body, brought into the world with one’s own labor, renders the mother incapacitated. For months, the mother struggles to comprehend the unthinkable. This shock occurs regardless of whether the death was anticipated, for, until it happens, a mother cannot conceive the death of a child emotionally (Meisenhelder, 2021). A respondent spoke at length about what it had been like to witness their child’s life with her death from the disease. She recollected some of her memories by stating, “You see, I always think of things like ‘Maybe she could still be saved? Maybe she is still alive? Maybe, there is still life on her? It is like you cannot accept everything. It was so sudden because she was a healthy kid.”

Many mothers, especially in the process of bereavement are having hard times accepting their child’s death (Gerrish, 2018). It argues that the moment the child departed from this world is the same moment that the bereaved parents’ dreams and hopes for their child also dies. They grieved for their deceased child’s potentials and how it will not flourish anymore. The parents’ dream of what they had for themselves also dies, the moments they will be missing and the memories they have shared feels like it is never enough.

#### 3.1.3 Visualization

Some people believed that the living could see and talk to the departed, especially when it is a loved one. Talking to the deceased became quite common for some. One of the recurring sub themes from the data gathered presents bereaved mothers’ visualizations of their children. This may be a way of reducing the pain of accepting the fact that their children are not physically around anymore.

### Imagination

One respondent reported that for that year, she has no missed single moment that she cannot think of her deceased child. She always prays for her every time. She said “Sometimes, I ask the God ‘why did you get this child from me too early?’ Of course, she has been with me for 30 years and how can I forget about her.”

Visualizing her deceased child is a way to comfort her whenever she feels lonely. It might also be an indirect way to change herself especially that she told the researchers that there is no second that she cannot think of her.

#### 3.1.4 Acceptance and fate

The expected final stage of the grieving process of the bereaved is the acceptance that the deceased will no longer be here and one will be able to live through feelings of grief and pain. People know that one cannot run from death and many have believed that if it is the time, it will be. Many also believed that death is inevitable, one cannot stop nor avoid it, and one cannot do anything about it. Some believed that it is master plan of a Higher Being.

### Higher being’s plan

Most people are convinced in the spiritual belief that when someone died, he/she will go to heaven. One respondent believes in trusting with the God’s process. As a part of accepting the loss, people tend to associate and incorporate

the death as something done by a supernatural force. In order to make sense of loss, people think that there is a purpose why the Higher Being redeemed their departed loved ones. All of the respondents have gone through this. One stated that, "Every time I pray, there is no missed chance that I cannot think of her. I always seek guidance from Allah and pray 'Oh Allah, I will trust you my child' I do not know, it is really hard to erase all the memories about her."

### Perception towards Death

In accepting the loss, Mommy M has formed a perception that death is a natural phenomenon. In the respondent's case, she believes that all people will experience this kind of situation. She stated that, "We will all leave this world and what we will bring to the hereafter is our faith. Every time I pray, it is like all the hardship and burden are gone."

Mothers' perception that people disappear because they are forgetting, which in turn intensifies grief feelings including guilt, fear, self-doubt, anger, loneliness, and feeling abandoned. The convergence of guilt, fear, self-doubt, anger, loneliness, and feeling abandoned that are generated when once-supportive people disappear add considerably to parents' suffering and impede their arduous journey towards healing (Denhup, 2014)

### *3.2. Effects of child's death*

This theme encompasses the effects of the death to the mother. It is divided into three categories namely: (a) social effects, (b) psychological effects and (c) physical effects.

#### 3.2.1 Social Effects

A catastrophic loss triggers intense empathy right at that moment and shortly thereafter is forgotten by all except those traumatized by the loss. Social norms cue mothers to behave as if nothing happened. Often others feel helpless, inadequate, and afraid to raise the subject, thus, reinforcing the tragedy as a taboo topic of conversation. Mothers seek out those who they may be able to share openly, but still mindful of the toll constant grief expressions may take on a friendship. Mothers may fear losing even close friends by the constant need to express their distress and talk of their child. Thus, mothers take on a balancing act, juggling their own needs with the preservation of the relationship.

### Familial Relationship

Most of the participants have changes in the perceptions of themselves because of their struggles with grief. In terms of adaptive changes, one mother explained how she had become less neurotic by her willingness to face her fears. In addition, she felt more honest and authentic in how she lived her life specially in the way she treated her family, "Ever since my child was gone, I started to give more importance to my family than anything else. I always take care of my grandchildren unconditionally. "Now that I am old, the important thing for me is I have taken care of them properly before I leave this world. However, it was also noted that this mother described how many of these adaptive changes in her self-perceptions had been overshadowed by complications in her grieving process.

#### 3.2.3 Psychological Effects

The mother is best served by drawing close to others most affected by the loss. New bonds are possible with the others who loved her child, including the father and siblings. Families who can share their grief openly create most healthy atmosphere of positive coping and mutual support. The joint sense of loss allows for a more intense connection with those sharing that loss, bringing an element of healing into the bleak emptiness. For families, verbalizing the feelings, sharing comforts, and comforting each other must be blended with forgiveness and understanding as each person may be more irritable, self-absorbed, and thoughtless in the midst of grief. Studies

report that close family connections are associated with seven lower negative psychological outcomes of child loss.

#### Emotions brought because of the child's death

All human pain triggers an angry reaction. In grief, the anger may be aimed at God, the One who is supposed to prevent and protect such devastation, or at those who appeared to have caused the loss, as in an auto accident. The extensive degree of pain results in huge amounts of anger that are expressed diffusely:

When I reached the Doctor (Hospital), I said "Hey, save her for me, bring her to the ICU for me!" then they said, it is too late, she does not have any pulse already. Allahu Akbar (God is Great)... that feeling is a death itself for me. I really fainted."

A manifestation of grief, anger is a more culturally acceptable emotion than grief and easier to express. Anger is second-degree grief, the outer layer of protection to attempt to smother the intense, overwhelming, and intolerable sense of loss. Under the anger lies the pain (Gerrish, 2018). Once the pain is expressed, the anger may well dissipate for some period. As the grief heals in a healthy way over the years, the anger dissolves, no longer needed.

#### Reaction to losing a child

Mothers need reassurance that this devastating reaction is typical and expected, as well as comfort that they will heal with time. Losing a child is excruciatingly a painful experience that can literally make someone shout. Based on the statements made by the participants, it seems that shouting is their way of releasing the tension or feeling that they feel towards the death of their child. For Mommy S, she stated that she always thinks of her child not unless she will not be mentioned. Every time she prays, there is no moment that she can think about her deceased child. This coincides with an article released by True Stress Management (2016), stating that screaming helps individuals breathe out the stress that they feel inside them and could be made them feel relieved.

#### 3.2.4 Physical Effects

Grieving mothers are affected vastly by the child's death that even the normal things they have been doing regularly are affected. One factor that is visibly identifiable during bereavement is one's physical change. According to Mommy B, she stated from the interview that, "I got old fast because of her. As you can see, I really look old."

In this state of loss, the mother's ability to function is greatly reduced as symptoms of grief consume all areas of her life: cognitive dysfunction, physical symptoms, as well as the constant emotional turmoil. Although physical symptoms of grief such as insomnia, nausea, fatigue are common in many losses, in maternal grief such symptoms are more frequent, intense, and long lasting that could last to several years, decreasing slowing in intensity over time. The loss of a child has been associated with higher morbidity and mortality (Bailey, 2014).

#### 3.2.5 Range in happiness

Some mothers experience a range in their level of happiness. Happiness may be absent. When happiness is absent, a bereaved parent is burdened by a heavy weight. Most of the respondents explained what the absence of happiness is like for them. Mommy S stated that, "My children are letting me do various activities just to make me feel well. In fact, they will bring me tomorrow to Dahilayan. They are distracting me. However, despite all their efforts, I can still remember her."

### 3.3. Coping Mechanisms

This theme encompasses the coping mechanism and strategies utilized by the mothers who lost their child. Three themes have emerged under this objective, namely: (a) unintentional way of coping, (b) intentional way of coping and (c) child's death as a bittersweet experience

#### Unintentional way of coping

Some mothers described how their ability to cope with their child's death had improved once they stopped searching for answers as to why their child had died. Many mothers reached this point when they realized they would never find the answers they sought.

#### Finding hope from the living

The thought of living many years without their child is unbearable. The presence of a surviving child is the most powerful maternal incentive to go on living. One key factor to distract the bereaved from this situation is to find hope from the living. One respondent's way of finding hope is through taking care of her grandchildren and in increasing faith in God. She stated, "Now that I am old, if ever I left this world, then the important thing is I have taken care of them properly. Now that I have already retired from work, what I do is to take care of my grandchildren. In this stage of my life, praying and increasing my faith to God is enough for me."

#### Defense mechanism

One defense mechanism is rationalization, a defense mechanism where people make acceptable reasons in order to cover what they are really feeling. This subtheme emerged when compared to Sigmund Freud's defense mechanism wherein this surfaced because people protect themselves unconsciously from the anxiety they are feeling. This is evident with Mommy B wherein she compares her experiences with other people. During the interview she said, "My relatives always say, 'It is going to be alright, as you can see, she had replaced herself with her daughters,' even my cousin said to me that I should leave it to God because she also lost her only child due to dengue."

Losing someone is one of the greatest turning points in one's life. Bereaved may not want to accept and cope with the reality that their loved one is gone. But one should be able to let people back in his/her life again, to be able to realize that there are people who are waiting for him/her to face the truth that the loved one is gone physically but he/she will always be in his/her heart (Parabuac, Zarraga, Garcia and Tenorio, 2019).

#### 3.3.1 Intentional way of coping

##### Solace

Solace encompasses the things that the bereaved mothers seek or do in order to find comfort or relief. Mommy S, for instance, do activities that her other children make her do just to distract her from grieving. She mentioned, "Right now, I and my children and grandchildren are living in the same house. They are doing their best to distract me. Because of them, I can forget my (deceased child) for a while."

This connection is what really gives solace to the mother. According to Humbeeck, et al. (2016), even the simple stuff like clothes the child wore are treasured by the bereaved mothers. According to the participants, through these things, they can still hold despite the child's absence and are able to feel the connection they had with their deceased child.



### Belief in Higher Power

The respondents described how their beliefs about the world and life had permanently changed because of their child's death. Most of these changes occurred in the domains of spiritual or religious views and in their assumptions about the world. These statements from the participants imply their belief to the Higher Power's control over the things they are experiencing. Denhup (2014) pronounced that faith to God gives the parents hope. It is through faith that these parents are able to withstand the grief they have due to their loss. Others cling to their faith and by clinging to God, they feel less alone and think that God is with them at this critical situation. One respondent mentioned that, "At this stage of my life, praying and increasing my faith to God is enough for me. You see, we will all leave this world and what we will bring in the hereafter is our faith. Every time I pray, it is like all the hardship and burden eventually go off."

The only answers to existential questions are spiritual. Mothers may turn to their own faith beliefs and may find the most help with spiritual counselors and resources. Else, they may reject long held beliefs and begin a search for new beliefs that they can embrace. Either way, the journey for meaning in suffering often accompanies such loss.

#### 3.3.2 Child's death as a bittersweet of experience

Mommy A described her current life positively. She stated: "Alhamdulillah (Thank God) because my children never abandoned me ever since my child died. I feel much better because of them. This is where we put extreme patience."

It can be implied that given the experience she had, she was able to restore her life and progress to a stronger, more positive individual. Since this mother was able to cope with her child's death, she thinks that she will be able to surpass the challenges that are about to come. It is the mothers' ability to survive and progress from the situation that made them feel that way.

## **4. Conclusions and Recommendations**

From the patterns of grievances and coping mechanisms presented in the results and discussions, it can be said that a mother's grief is a phenomenon that strengthens her being. After the child's death, the mothers go through a tedious journey wherein the existence of pain, longing, sadness, guilt and anger were felt. Throughout the process of grieving, it is depicted that the grief never really leaves and that there are times that it is intensified even more, especially if the memories of the child were recalled by the mother. It was discovered that even though there are a lot of theories about one's grieving process and stages or tasks to be done, there is no linear pattern that needs to be followed in grieving because grieving varies from people.

Most of the participants experienced a normal grief which is accompanied by emotional or physical responses that are normal for grieving individuals, except for Mommy S who experienced a traumatic grief in which the disappearance of her child was very unexpected for her. Results also show that the mothers really grieve and regret that their adult child had missed. The death of a child leaves an indelible mark on the mother's being. It is a bittersweet experience that has effects, which are beyond what one can handle. The researchers found that this occurrence negatively affects the mother's physical, psychological and social state. However, posttraumatic growth such as betterment of socialization and attainment of resiliency and happiness is a positive effect of the death. Processing the grief and being with people who had the same experience helped the mothers the most in coping. Another factor that helped them cope is their belief in the Higher Being. These religious beliefs are assumed a medium from which the mothers can derive meaning. It was also indicated that meaning making also aids the coping of mothers wherein they give sense and meaning to the traumatic event that had happened. It was also found that not anything in specific, like a specific thing, individual or action, is what brings comfort and solace

to the mother. Instead, it is the feeling of “still being connected with the child” that gives them a sense of relief whenever they feel the grief brought by the child’s death.

In accordance with the findings of this study, the researchers suggest the following recommendations: The study’s limitation is that it is too broad to fully scrutinize mother’s grief. Therefore, future researchers are recommended to have a further study on the existing theories about grieving process. It is also suggested to find respondents that have not gone through any interventions yet. To the families, it is difficult to lose someone. A family might eventually learn to live through the pain. However, it is important for the family members to support each other through the process of grieving.

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