

Love Beyond the Lecture Hall: Lived Experiences of Married Couples Emerging from Teacher-Student Relationships

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Abstract

This study examines the lived experiences of married couples whose relationships originated from a student-teacher context, focusing on how such relationships develop, transition, and are sustained over time. Anchored in Social Exchange Theory and Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, the study utilized a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological design and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to explore meaning-making processes. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three married couples residing in Laguna and Batangas, Philippines, who had at least five years of marital experience. Findings revealed that during the academic phase, participants maintained professional boundaries through secrecy and role differentiation due to institutional policies. Social stigma and age-related stereotypes led to emotional inconsistency and adaptive behaviors such as concealment and temporary separation. Over time, relationships evolved through increased openness, improved communication, and effective conflict management. Shared values, including mutual respect, family involvement, and faith, strengthened relational stability. Key turning points such as parenthood and life readiness influenced the transition to marriage, while love evolved into a form of long-term commitment and responsibility. The study concludes that resilience, emotional maturity, and ethical awareness are essential in sustaining such relationships. Recommendations emphasize the importance of maintaining boundaries, strengthening institutional policies, and supporting relational well-being through education and counseling. This study aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-Being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) by addressing emotional well-being, ethical practices, and institutional responsibility. It contributes to sustainability by promoting healthy relationships, strengthening ethical standards in educational environments, and supporting social and institutional stability.

Keywords: Communication, Conflict Management, Emotional Development, Phenomenology, Student-Teacher Relationships, Sustainability

1. Introduction

This study examines the lived experiences of married couples whose relationships originated from a student-teacher context, focusing on how such relationships develop, transition, and are sustained over time. It situates these experiences within ethical, cultural, and relational frameworks, emphasizing power dynamics, societal perceptions, and emotional development. Using a phenomenological approach, the study explores how couples interpret their relationship journey, cope with challenges, and maintain long-term marital stability.

1.1 Background of the Study on Married Couples from Student-Teacher Relationships

Romantic relationships develop through social interactions shaped by roles, responsibilities, and shared experiences. These voluntary connections are grounded in emotional bonds, attraction, and mutual commitment (Cloutier et al. 2020). However, relationships that originate in student-teacher contexts raise ethical concerns due to inherent power imbalances and the teacher's authority role (Danaher, 2021; Chen et al., 2021). Maintaining professional boundaries is essential to protect students and uphold educational integrity (Santos, 2024). In the Philippine context, romantic relationships are influenced by both traditional and modern values, where courtship often begins with friendship and evolves into commitment (Atong et al., 2022). Marriage is regarded as a lifelong institution shaped by cultural practices such as *pamamanhikan* and sustained through trust, communication, and shared responsibility (Badilla, 2020; Team, 2023). Despite these cultural foundations, limited research exists on couples whose relationships began in academic settings and later transitioned into marriage (Bustamante, 2020; Santos, 2024). This study addresses this gap by examining couples with at least five years of marriage, focusing on their lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies.

1.2 Themes and Insights from Related Literature on Relationship Development and Marriage

Existing literature highlights that romantic relationships influence emotional, academic, and interpersonal development (Honghao et al., 2021). Self-disclosure, communication, and emotional expression are essential to relationship satisfaction and stability (Truscott, 2023; Khezri et al., 2020; Pace, 2023). In the Philippine setting, evolving courtship practices reflect

the integration of technology and cultural change (Atong et al., 2022). Marriage is associated with emotional and physical well-being, although its benefits depend on relationship quality rather than the institution itself (Huntington et al., 2021). Effective communication, emotional intelligence, and conflict management are critical for long-term marital satisfaction (Khezri et al., 2020; Pace, 2023). Filipino marriages continue to balance traditional values with modern influences, including shifts toward equality and alternative arrangements such as cohabitation (Daud, 2024; Recuenco, 2025; Obsena et al., 2024). Studies on student-teacher relationships emphasize ethical considerations, power dynamics, and the importance of boundaries (Gallardo, 2022; Turgaliyeva, 2024; Maharaj, 2020). When such relationships transition into marriage, couples face unique challenges related to role adjustment and societal expectations (Dagum et al., 2024). Additionally, stigma, social perception, and stereotypes particularly in non-normative relationships affect relationship quality and well-being (Doyle and Barreto, 2022; Schmidt et al., 2021; Koziara, K., et al. 2022). Attachment theory further explains relationship dynamics, where secure attachment promotes emotional regulation and satisfaction, while insecure attachment contributes to conflict and instability (Amani et al., 2024; Fávero et al., 2021; Aguirre et al., 2024). These insights collectively emphasize the complexity of romantic and marital relationships across personal, social, and cultural dimensions.

1.3 Local, National, and Global Context of Student-Teacher Romantic Relationships

Globally, student-teacher relationships are examined in relation to ethical standards, power structures, and educational outcomes (Wang, 2024; Turgaliyeva, 2024). In many contexts, teachers historically held authority while students were passive recipients, although modern perspectives emphasize more balanced interactions (Wang, 2024). In the Philippines, legal and moral perspectives on student-teacher romantic relationships have evolved. While earlier cases such as *Evelyn Chua-Qua v. Clave* reflected leniency, current laws such as Republic Act No. 7610 emphasize child protection and ethical responsibility (Estrada, 2025). Public opinion remains divided, with some acceptance alongside concerns about professional boundaries and institutional responsibility (Bustamante, 2020). Societal changes, including increasing cohabitation and shifting attitudes toward marriage, further influence relationship norms (Recuenco, 2025). Cultural expectations, stigma, and age-gap stereotypes continue to shape public perception and relational experiences in the Philippine setting (Manalili et al., 2024; Pamis et al., 2021; Garcia, 2024; Ng et al., 2021). These contextual factors highlight the complexity of relationships that deviate from conventional norms.

1.4 Theoretical or Conceptual Basis for Relationship Dynamics and Marital Development

This study is anchored in Social Exchange Theory, which explains that individuals evaluate relationships based on perceived rewards and costs, maintaining those that provide greater benefits (Kelley & Thibaut, 1959, as cited in Righetti et al., 2022). Individuals may accept short-term sacrifices for long-term relational stability and emotional security (Righetti et al., 2022). It also draws on Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love, which conceptualizes love as a combination of intimacy, passion, and commitment (Sternberg, 1986, as cited in Nabila & Gunawan, 2023). These components evolve over time and are essential to relationship satisfaction and stability (Nabila & Gunawan, 2023). The study further employs Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Hermeneutic Phenomenology to explore how couples construct meaning from their experiences within broader cultural and ethical contexts. These frameworks enable an in-depth understanding of how relationships transition from structured academic roles into equal marital partnerships.

1.5 Research Gaps and Rationale on Marriages Emerging from Student-Teacher Relationships

Despite extensive research on romantic relationships, marriage, and teacher-student interactions, there is limited focus on relationships that originate in academic settings and successfully transition into long-term marriages (Bustamante, 2020; Santos, 2024). Existing studies primarily address ethical concerns, educational outcomes, or general relational dynamics, but rarely examine long-term lived experiences. Furthermore, there is insufficient exploration of how couples navigate stigma, legal frameworks, and evolving relational roles after the academic phase. The lack of qualitative, phenomenological studies on this topic highlights the need for deeper insight into emotional development, coping mechanisms, and marital stability in such relationships. This study addresses these gaps by focusing on the lived experiences of couples who have sustained their marriages over time.

1.6 Alignment with Relevant Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

This study aligns with SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being by examining emotional well-being, relationship stability, and mental health outcomes in long-term partnerships. It contributes to SDG 4 – Quality Education by addressing ethical practices and professional boundaries within educational institutions. It also supports SDG 5 – Gender Equality by exploring power dynamics and role transitions from hierarchical to equal partnerships, and SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions through its focus on ethical standards, institutional policies, and responsible conduct in education.

1.7 Importance of the Study to Multidisciplinary Sustainability

The study contributes to socio-economic and community sustainability by promoting healthy, stable relationships that support family well-being. It advances educational and institutional sustainability by informing ethical guidelines and professional standards in academic environments. Additionally, it supports public health and psychological sustainability

by providing insights into emotional resilience, coping strategies, and relational well-being. The study also contributes to cultural sustainability by examining how Filipino values and evolving social norms influence relationship formation and marriage. By integrating perspectives from psychology, education, sociology, and ethics, the study offers a multidisciplinary understanding of nontraditional relationships and their long-term sustainability in society.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative hermeneutic-phenomenological research design to explore and interpret the lived experiences of participants. Hermeneutic phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals make meaning of their experiences through interpretation, incorporating both participants' perspectives and the researcher's reflective insights (Crowther and Thomson, 2020). This approach emphasizes the interaction between researcher and participant in constructing meaning through a merging of perspectives. The design was appropriate for examining how married couples experienced the transition from a student-teacher relationship to long-term marriage. It enabled an in-depth understanding of emotional development, relational dynamics, ethical considerations, and social influences across different stages of their relationship, from academic beginnings to marital life.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted among participants residing in Laguna and Batangas, Philippines. These locations provided the context for examining relationships that originated within formal academic institutions and later developed into long-term marriages. The setting allowed for an exploration of cultural, social, and institutional influences shaping the participants' experiences within the Philippine context.

2.3 Participants of the Study

The participants consisted of three married couples who were previously involved in a student-teacher relationship within an academic setting. Each couple had been married for at least five years, allowing sufficient time to reflect on their marital experiences and relational development. The participants were selected based on their shared experience of transitioning from a structured academic relationship into a committed marital partnership. No restrictions were placed on variables such as profession, age, or religious background, as the focus was on their lived experiences and relational journey.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling to select participants with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. This non-probability sampling method involves deliberately choosing individuals based on specific characteristics relevant to the research objectives (Bullard, 2024). It is widely used in qualitative research to ensure that participants can provide meaningful and information-rich data. The sample size was guided by the principle of information power, which considers the study's aim, sample specificity, theoretical framework, data quality, and analytical strategy (Wutich et al., 2024). Participants were required to have experienced a student-teacher relationship that transitioned into marriage and to be willing to share their experiences openly. This ensured that the data collected would provide deep insights into emotional dynamics, coping mechanisms, and social influences associated with their relationship development.

2.5 Research Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a set of open-ended, semi-structured interview questions designed to elicit detailed narratives from participants. Semi-structured interviews are widely used in qualitative research as they allow for both consistency and flexibility, enabling researchers to explore complex behaviors, attitudes, and experiences in depth (Berler & Magaldi, 2020; Adams, 2021). The interview guide followed a structured flow while allowing additional themes to emerge naturally from participants' responses. The instrument consisted of rapport-building questions, core interview questions, and debriefing questions. Specifically, it included four rapport-building questions, nine main guiding questions, and five debriefing questions, with additional follow-up questions developed during the interviews. To ensure validity and reliability, the interview guide underwent expert review by qualitative researchers and faculty members. The validation process involved evaluation by the research adviser and three experts from the College of Arts, Sciences, and Education at the University of Perpetual Help System-Dalta Calamba Campus. Their feedback ensured alignment with the study objectives and strengthened the credibility of the instrument, resulting in the issuance of a validation certificate.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection followed purposive sampling principles to identify participants who met the study criteria (Turner, 2020; Bougie & Sekaran, 2020). Married couples whose relationships began in a student-teacher context were selected to ensure relevance to the research objectives. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including the option to withdraw at any time. Interviews were scheduled at convenient times and conducted either face-to-face or online, depending on participant preference. Permission to audio record the interviews was secured to ensure accuracy and

transparency. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, beginning with rapport-building questions to establish trust, followed by core questions exploring participants' experiences, and concluding with debriefing questions to ensure participant comfort. Follow-up questions were used when necessary to clarify responses and deepen understanding. This process facilitated the collection of rich, detailed narratives regarding the participants' emotional, social, and relational experiences.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The study employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze the data. IPA focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences through a detailed examination of their narratives. The analysis involved close reading of interview transcripts, initial noting, and the identification of emergent themes while considering the double hermeneutic process, where participants interpret their experiences and researchers interpret those interpretations (Smith et al., 2021). This approach enabled the identification of both individual and shared patterns in the experiences of the couples, providing insights into how they navigated emotional, relational, and ethical challenges as they transitioned from academic roles to long-term marital relationships.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the Philippine Psychological Association Code of Ethics and the Data Privacy Act of 2012 to ensure the protection of participants. Confidentiality and privacy were strictly maintained, and personal information was safeguarded throughout the research process. Participants provided informed consent and were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Participation was voluntary, and no coercion was involved. The study focused on understanding lived experiences rather than making legal or moral judgments, ensuring respect for participants' perspectives. Researchers prioritized the well-being of participants and handled all data with care and responsibility.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Lived Experiences of Couples Transitioning from Student-Teacher Relationships

3.1.1 Professional Boundaries and Respect

The findings show that participants consistently observed institutional rules by maintaining professionalism and discretion during their academic relationship. They avoided public displays of affection, kept their relationship hidden, and clearly distinguished their roles within and outside the academic setting. Their actions reflected awareness of ethical limitations and a conscious effort to comply with school policies. These results indicate that adherence to institutional boundaries served as a protective mechanism that allowed relationships to exist without violating professional expectations. This aligns with Dagum et al. (2024), who emphasized that couples transitioning from student-teacher relationships must establish clear boundaries and redefine roles. Observing ethical conduct reflects maturity and commitment, demonstrating that responsibility strengthens relational stability.

3.1.2 Emotional Inconsistency under Social Pressure

The findings reveal that participants experienced fluctuating emotions such as anxiety, discomfort, and self-doubt. While some perceived their relationship as normal, they simultaneously feared judgment from society and institutions, leading to internal conflict. This emotional tension suggests that external perceptions significantly influenced internal emotional stability. These findings are consistent with Truscott (2023), who noted that individuals experience hesitation and emotional strain when navigating relationships subject to societal judgment. The results highlight how stigma shapes emotional responses in developing relationships.

3.1.3 Relationship Adjustment Strategies

The findings show that participants adopted protective strategies such as limiting public visibility and, in some cases, initiating temporary separation. They concealed their relationship, avoided public spaces, and distanced themselves to prevent criticism or accusations of bias. These behaviors demonstrate adaptive coping mechanisms in response to social and institutional pressures. This supports Wang (2024), who explained that couples facing stigma often conceal relationships to align with societal expectations. Similarly, Gallardo (2022) found that individuals under moral scrutiny make decisions to protect their reputation, indicating that adjustment strategies are essential for relational survival.

3.1.4 Age-Related Stereotypes and Social Judgment

The findings indicate that participants encountered criticism related to age differences, including doubts about maturity, compatibility, and stability. These judgments came from peers, colleagues, and the community, contributing to hesitation and emotional strain. This reflects broader societal stereotypes toward non-normative relationships. The results align with Manalili et al. (2024), who found that Filipino couples face age-gap stigma influenced by cultural expectations, and Pamis et al. (2021), who noted that such couples cope through resilience and mutual adjustment. These findings emphasize the role of social perception in shaping relational experiences.

3.1.5 Development of Open Affection after Academic Phase

The findings show that after graduation, participants expressed their relationship more openly, engaging in public interactions and displaying affection without fear. This transition marked increased comfort, emotional closeness, and relational freedom. This shift indicates that the removal of institutional constraints allowed relationships to develop more authentically. Consistent with Gallardo (2022), openness enhances emotional connection and strengthens intimacy. The findings suggest that freedom of expression plays a critical role in deepening relational bonds.

3.1.6 Conflict Management in Marriage

The findings reveal that participants managed conflicts through calm and non-confrontational approaches, including silence, quick resolution, and reconciliation efforts, often initiated by husbands. Conflicts were generally brief and resolved through understanding and humility. These practices indicate emotional maturity and effective relational strategies. This aligns with Aguirre et al. (2024), which highlights the role of secure attachment in calm conflict handling, and Khezri et al. (2020) and Fávero et al. (2021), which emphasize emotional regulation in maintaining marital satisfaction. Additionally, Huntington et al. (2021) and Amani et al. (2024) support the importance of empathy and emotional responsibility in sustaining relationships.

3.1.7 Improved Communication and Emotional Expression

The findings show that communication evolved into more open, honest, and meaningful interactions. Participants reported increased transparency and emotional sharing, while expressions of affection shifted from verbal declarations to practical and caring actions. These results indicate that communication maturity strengthens relational stability. This supports Gallardo (2022), who emphasized openness and empathy in fostering intimacy, and Amani et al. (2024), who noted that emotional maturity is expressed through consistent supportive behaviors. The findings suggest that communication evolves alongside relational development.

3.1.8 Strengthening Relationship Foundations

The findings reveal that long-term relationship stability was grounded in mutual understanding, respect, shared responsibilities, family involvement, and faith. Participants emphasized emotional maturity and shared commitment as key factors in sustaining their marriage. These findings align with Daud (2024), which highlights the importance of respect and shared values in Filipino marriages, and Wang (2024), which emphasizes equality and teamwork. Additionally, Recuenco (2025) and Obsena et al. (2024) underscore the role of family and support systems in strengthening relationships.

3.2 Turning Points Leading to Marital Commitment

3.2.1 Parenthood as a Motivating Factor

The findings show that having children or expecting a child became a major turning point that led participants to formalize their relationship through marriage. Parenthood strengthened their commitment and encouraged the establishment of a stable family structure. This reflects cultural values that emphasize family stability. Daud (2024) supports this finding by noting that Filipino marriages prioritize family formation and long-term commitment, highlighting the role of children in reinforcing relational bonds.

3.2.2 Readiness for Life Commitment

The findings indicate that participants considered personal readiness, age, and life stage when deciding to marry. This awareness of timing and maturity influenced their decision to transition into a formal partnership. These findings align with Obsena et al. (2024), which emphasizes that relationship decisions are influenced by personal timelines and readiness. The results suggest that self-assessment plays a critical role in long-term commitment.

3.3 Evolution of Love toward Commitment and Responsibility

3.3.1 Redefining Love as Long-Term Commitment

The findings show that participants' understanding of love evolved from emotional attraction to a deeper commitment centered on responsibility, family, and shared obligations. Love was described as enduring, selfless, and rooted in long-term dedication. This transformation reflects the progression of relational maturity. Daud (2024) highlights the role of faith and family in shaping Filipino marital commitment, while Dagum et al. (2024) emphasizes that sustaining relationships requires mutual responsibility and support. These findings indicate that love becomes more stable and meaningful over time. Overall, the findings reveal a progression from restricted and socially constrained relationships to stable and committed marital partnerships. Couples demonstrated resilience by navigating institutional boundaries, managing societal stigma, and adapting emotionally and relationally. Over time, increased openness, communication, and shared values strengthened their relationships, while key turning points such as parenthood and life readiness reinforced their commitment. These experiences illustrate how nontraditional relationships can evolve into enduring and meaningful marital unions.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that relationships originating from a student-teacher context are significantly shaped by institutional policies, societal expectations, and personal development. During the academic phase, couples maintained professionalism through secrecy and strict boundary adherence, which influenced their relational dynamics. Social stigma and age-related stereotypes contributed to emotional discomfort and adaptive behaviors such as concealment and temporary separation. Over time, emotional closeness developed through openness, effective communication, and mature conflict management strategies. Shared values, including respect, family involvement, and faith, strengthened the foundation of their relationships. Key turning points such as parenthood and life readiness influenced their decision to marry. Ultimately, love evolved from initial emotional attraction into a deeper sense of commitment and responsibility centered on long-term partnership and family stability.

Based on the findings, couples who transitioned from a student-teacher relationship into marriage are encouraged to sustain healthy relational practices such as maintaining clear boundaries, fostering open communication, and supporting mutual growth. Educational institutions are recommended to strengthen policies, ethical guidelines, and support systems that promote professionalism and appropriate interactions. Teachers and students should remain aware of their roles and responsibilities to maintain a respectful and safe academic environment, seeking guidance when needed. Mental health professionals are encouraged to provide supportive spaces that help individuals and couples process experiences, improve communication, and strengthen emotional regulation. Researchers are advised to remain reflective and ethically responsible in interpreting participant experiences, while future researchers are encouraged to expand the study across different contexts and explore similar or contrasting relational experiences for deeper understanding.

The study is limited by its small sample size of three married couples, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. It focuses only on couples whose relationships successfully transitioned into marriage, excluding those that did not result in long-term commitment. The research is also confined to specific locations within Laguna and Batangas, which may limit its applicability to other cultural or institutional contexts. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported experiences through interviews may introduce subjective bias, as the findings depend on participants' personal interpretations and willingness to share their experiences.

Compliance with ethical standards

The authors declare no conflict of interest, and this study received no external funding. The research was conducted with participants who voluntarily agreed to take part after providing informed consent, and their contributions are gratefully acknowledged along with the support of the affiliated academic institution. Data were collected through non-invasive, semi-structured interviews, and all information was handled with strict confidentiality, ensuring that no identifying details of the participants were disclosed.

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