

Embracing Aging Through Lived Experience: Elderly Fulfillment Narratives as Foundations for Educational and Community-Based Interventions

Jennylou B. Dela Rosa, La Consolacion University, Philippines
Benedick M. Aguilar, Holy Angel University, Philippines
Janne Andre M. Diego, Holy Angel University, Philippines
Frederick Dennis M. Mercado, Holy Angel University, Philippines
Sarah Christine G. Tan, Holy Angel University, Philippines
Clarissa F. Delariarte, Holy Angel University, Philippines

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Abstract

As the global population ages, including in the Philippines, the roles of psychology, social work, and health sciences professionals become increasingly crucial. Their work is integral in promoting the well-being of the elderly. This study examines how elderly Filipinos perceive life fulfillment, focusing on the role of positive emotions, social engagement, and a sense of purpose. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 elderly individuals from Central Luzon. The results revealed that family support, spirituality, and community involvement are central to their sense of fulfillment, presenting opportunities for enhancing their well-being. Conversely, social isolation and financial insecurity, while challenges, can be addressed through targeted interventions. The study underscores the transformative potential of integrating gerontological content into educational programs in psychology, social work, health sciences, and education. This integration can equip future professionals with the empathy, cultural awareness, and skills necessary to address the emotional, cognitive, and social needs of aging populations, inspiring them to make a significant difference in the lives of the elderly. Ultimately, the study supports the development of community-based interventions and learning materials, such as the educational guide “Embracing Aging,” which draws directly from elderly narratives and promotes positive aging by providing practical advice, psychological insights, and cultural perspectives. These initiatives can contribute to the development of more age-inclusive, compassionate, and culturally grounded professional practices.

Keywords: elderly, well-being, life fulfillment, spirituality, qualitative

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Introduction

As the world ages at a rapid pace, many countries, including the Philippines, face the challenging task of providing a meaningful life for their elderly citizens. The government already has over 7.5 million older adults and is experiencing a rapid increase in the older age group, where it is projected that older people will make up a sizable percentage of the population by 2030. This demographic shift highlights a pressing need to examine the physical, emotional, and social aspects of life satisfaction among the elderly population, whose well-being not only affects the individual but also contributes to broader societal development. As the elderly population is rapidly growing, their experience in old age becomes increasingly dependent on healthcare, economic security, family support, and opportunities for social interaction (Cruz et al., 2022).

The elderly in the Philippines live in a socio-cultural environment that reflects traditional family roles, but is also influenced by modern economic realities. That special setting allows for a traditional yet family-centered culture that guarantees emotional and economic support, yet simultaneously presents challenges such as declining health, loneliness, and economic uncertainty. Current trends in aging in the Philippines highlight the crucial role that health and social services must play in promoting the well-being of older adults. While considerable effort is being invested in government social welfare programs, including the National Health Insurance Program, these often prove to be only partially effective and insufficient to meet all the requirements of the elderly. The rise of social isolation and mental health problems, such as depression, is experienced among elderly Filipinos, specifically those residing alone, without adequate support from their family. Programs that promote community engagement and increase contact with others are presented by Cruz et al. (2022) as ways to enhance psychological well-being in old age, particularly during times when traditional family support structures break down due to migration and urbanization.

In an aging society, there is a need for academics, policymakers, social workers, mental health advocates and professionals to understand the perspectives of the elderly. Such an understanding could be established by developing comprehensive strategies that are responsive not only to the physical needs of the elderly but also to their mental and social needs. The results of the study would constitute significant contributions to the academic and mental health program discourse regarding aging, aiming to make the aging of the Filipino elderly an honored and fulfilling part of life.

The study supports the integration of gerontological insights into academic programs—particularly in psychology, education, social work, and health sciences—so that future professionals are better equipped with the cultural competence, empathy, and applied knowledge to serve aging populations. One such output is the educational guide “Embracing Aging Through Lived Experience,” a tool that translates qualitative data into practical, culturally responsive intervention strategies.

Review of Related Literature

Pursuing life fulfillment among older adults is a complex and multidimensional issue driven by psychological, social, health, and economic factors. In a world where older adults are increasingly found in all countries, including the Philippines, such dynamics will need to be studied with the hope of improving the quality of life for older adults. This review examines four key themes: psychological well-being, social support, health, and economic security.

Physical Health and Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being is a factor that influences how older adults perceive their life fulfillment. It encompasses aspects of emotional regulation, life satisfaction, and resilience. Indeed, scientific research demonstrates that engaging in meaningful activities is necessary to enhance psychological well-being and, consequently, overall life fulfillment. According to Chen et al. (2022), participation in hobbies, volunteer activities, and community work is more positively associated with psychological well-being and less likely to lead to life dissatisfaction. Those who are elderly and whose daily lives carry a sense of meaning tend to be happier and are more satisfied with their lives.

Lifestyle and environmental conditions do play a significant role in psychological well-being. The elderly derive happiness from religion and community activities because such activities enhance their social relations and sense of belonging. As Cruz et al. (2022) postulated, older Filipinos typically participate in religious and community activities that enhance their social network, thereby facilitating the repair process of their emotional support systems. Such cultural attachment assumes a psychological appreciation of the act, as it helps the elderly enhance their quality of life in old age by supporting groups.

Conversely, living alone and experiencing poor health, limitations in daily activities, and symptoms of depression are associated with lower levels of life satisfaction according to Kandapan (2023) as cited by Cho et al. (2023), several studies have found that the decline in physical health capabilities is associated with a decrease in life satisfaction as one ages. Besides the physical and relational factors, psychological factors such as personal resilience add value to the experience of life fulfillment. According to Trică et al. (2024), while old age presents numerous challenges, resilience enables the elderly to adapt relatively more easily to change, which can be interpreted as an accumulative positive attitude towards the physical, mental, and social changes that characterize old age. Understanding these psychological dimensions will be beneficial in developing interventions to enhance the well-being of the elderly within the distinct cultural context of the Philippines.

Social Support and Family Dynamics

Social support is essential for developing life satisfaction among older adults, particularly within their familial and community environments. In most developing countries, such as the Philippines, the traditional family structure remains the primary support system for many families. Noquiao (2021) discovered that among the older aged population, strong familial bonds are related to higher life satisfaction. This is more explicitly manifested when families reside under the same roof in a multi-generational family setup. These relationships are deeply emotional and provide a sense of meaning and belonging, while offering a practical form of support.

However, changing family dynamics, exacerbated by urban migration and economic challenges, can threaten traditional support structures. Community involvement serves as a substitution for bond disruption in the family circle. Involvement in community or neighborhood activities enables older persons to form new friendships and social relationships, which are significant for their mental health (Cruz et al., 2022). Programs concerning social interaction maintenance will be a life-fulfilling activity because they offer new possibilities for friendship and companionship. No doubt, social networks are highly significant because they

act as a buffer against loneliness and serve as a source of shared experiences and mutual support among peers.

Economic Security and Financial Well-being

The other aspect is economic security, as it plays a vital role in defining older adults' life satisfaction. It further empowers the elderly to remain independent and capable of accessing medical services, as well as engaging in leisure activities. Filipino elders have faced significant financial challenges due to inadequate pensions, low incomes, and insufficient savings.

The results of a study by Li et al. as cited by the study of Papi et al. (2021) showed that life satisfaction in older adults is associated with the level of education, financial resources, self-assessment of health, receiving financial support from the children and satisfying their support, staying at home, seeing and visiting neighbors, and inviting them to dinner. Moreover, Cruz et al. (2022) note that there is a direct and straightforward link between economic difficulties and lower life satisfaction among older adults. Economic constraints often characterize their inability to fulfill some of the most basic needs and participate in social activities, which, in turn, boost feelings of inadequacy as well as isolation. Two of the more universal predictors of loneliness that recent systematic reviews have highlighted include poor health and financial insecurity, with most of these focusing on populations from high-income countries (Dahlberg et al., 2022).

Financial security, as studied by Lutz et al. (2021), enables the elderly to engage in activities of interest and maintain their capacity for independence, providing evidence that economic assets contribute to overall well-being. In addition, Bierman et al. (2023) stated that financial stress can have devastating negative consequences not just on the symptoms of depression but much more significantly down the line for anxiety and anger. This occurs mainly because the problems in affording everyday needs rob the elderly of a sense of mastery and self-esteem. However, they also feel less socially significant as their financial problems worsen. This threat that an increasing level of financial strain in later life poses is therefore not only to heighten individual distress, but also, particularly with this creating a population of older adults who are even more powerless and marginalized, it is deeply worrying since the proportion of elderly around the world is growing fast.

This psychological burden highlights the importance of addressing economic issues through integrated psychological mechanisms and financial education. Endowing them with these financial management tools would certainly increase autonomy and satisfaction in their later years. Economic security, generally speaking, apart from improving access to health services and social interaction, contributes to the independence and dignity that old age can enjoy.

The Role of Religion and Spirituality in Aging

Lima et al. (2020) mentioned that various studies and research have been conducted to understand the relationship between spirituality and quality of life among the mentally ill elderly. Though the outcomes of the relationship cannot be universalized for all social groups of older people, there is some scientific proof that the same relationships improve the quality of life, enhance social exchange and social life, provide meaning to life, help face the finitude of life, and promote an optimistic outlook on aging. Moreover, based on the study by McManus (2024), studies consistently demonstrate a positive correlation between spirituality, religiosity, and mental health, supporting improvements in life quality, social interactions, and positive

attitudes towards aging. The belief in the transcendent or divine emerges as a significant dimension contributing to the meaning of life, resilience, and health promotion among older adults.

Research indicates that religion and spirituality play a significant role in supporting older adults, thereby making the aging process more manageable. Malone (2018) stipulated that such factors provide comfort and strength to the elderly as they navigate the challenges of aging. Lima et al. (2020) state that the belief in the transcendent or the divine represents an important dimension in the quality of life of older people, contributing to the meaning of life, resilience in the face of difficulties, and acting positively as a factor in health promotion. Furthermore, it highlighted that spirituality is crucial for coping with chronic diseases and for improving the quality of life for older adults. This study further postulated that it is only through spirituality wherein people find meaning beyond their challenges. Moreover, it plays a vital role in facilitating social interaction, which is essential for maintaining mental well-being.

In the Philippines, where Catholicism is dominant, the elderly exhibit strong religious affiliations. This cultural context shapes their coping resources and general life satisfaction. According to qualitative research by Pausanos (2013) on spirituality among elderly Filipinos, religious practices provide a framework for understanding life challenges, thereby enhancing their level of life fulfillment.

A notable study conducted by Basileyo (2019) found that spirituality and resilience significantly contribute to life satisfaction among older adults, especially those with chronic illnesses. The study highlights that spirituality acts as a mediating factor in reducing anxiety and enhancing overall well-being in aging populations, including the Filipino elderly.

Moreover, empirical evidence has supported the connection between religiosity and mental health. For instance, a research investigation by Coelho-Júnior et al. (2022) reveals that higher religious activity is correlated with reduced depressive and anxiety conditions among elderly populations. This is particularly relevant for the Filipino communities in which collective worship and community support are integral parts of everyday life.

Synthesis of Literature Review

Literature reviews on the well-being of the elderly suggest that several factors influence life satisfaction. These encompass physical health, social support, economic security, and spirituality. Of these, the psychological factor seems to be highly predictive of life fulfillment among the elderly. Numerous studies have demonstrated that engaging in meaningful activities, such as hobbies and community involvement, can enhance emotional control and resilience (Chen et al., 2022). Higher life satisfaction is associated with positive engagement in these activities, and poor physical health and social isolation negatively affect psychological well-being (Cho et al., 2023; Kandapan, 2023). In terms of social support, the traditional family structure prevalent in the Philippines is crucial for the satisfaction of elderly life (Noquiao, 2021). Rising trends in urban migration and changes in family dynamics are disrupting traditional support systems, ultimately leaving many older people isolated. Community involvement has become a critical alternative source of support for individuals experiencing loneliness, fostering new social relationships that lead to a reduction in loneliness (Cruz et al., 2022).

Economic security is yet another predictor of how well one will fare in old age. Financial security enables the elderly to be more independent in meeting their health needs and engaging in social activities, all of which contribute to a person's overall life satisfaction (Cruz et al., 2022; Papi et al., 2021). On the other hand, the lack of economic security raises perceived inadequacy and social withdrawal with relative risk to mental health problems in terms of anxiety and depression Bierman et al., 2023. Financial education and support are recommended interventions in reducing such tensions, thereby enhancing the maintenance of autonomy and dignity through older age. Finally, religion and spirituality are part of the coping mechanisms for most elderly, especially in the Filipino culture. Religious practice provides them with meaning, emotional resilience, and social support, thereby improving their mental health and overall life fulfillment (McManus 2024). Spirituality will not only help an older adult cope with and withstand the physical and emotional battles but also enable them to feel a sense of belonging with others, which is important for their well-being (Malone, 2018).

To summarize, the integration of psychological, social, economic, and spiritual factors may foster the well-being and life satisfaction of the aged. The studies presented herein serve as a springboard for developing culturally salient intervention strategies for elderly individuals in the Philippines.

Purpose of the Study

This study explores the lived experiences of elderly Filipinos to identify the key determinants of a well-lived life in later adulthood. In the context of the Philippines' ongoing demographic shift toward an aging population, it becomes increasingly important to understand how older adults define fulfillment through emotional resilience, meaningful relationships, spiritual grounding, and community involvement. Rather than focusing solely on physical health, this research emphasizes the psychological, social, and cultural factors that influence the well-being of the elderly.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the national and academic discourse on aging by providing nuanced insights into how elderly individuals construct meaning and purpose in their lives. It advocates for a holistic, culturally responsive approach to elder care—one that honors their narratives and leverages them as foundations for community-based and educational interventions. The findings inform not only policy and practice but also the development of learning materials and psychosocial programs that empower both older adults and the professionals who serve them. Through this lens, aging is not merely a period of decline but a continued journey of reflection, growth, and active participation in society.

Research Objective

Central Question: What are the perspectives of elderly Filipinos on the factors contributing to a well-lived life, and how do these perspectives influence their overall sense of life fulfillment?

Research Questions:

1. What characteristics do elderly Filipinos associate with a well-lived life?
2. What factors do elderly Filipinos perceive as obstacles to achieving a well-lived life?
3. How do elderly Filipinos evaluate their own lives about the concept of a well-lived life?
4. At what point do elderly Filipinos feel they have attained a well-lived life, and how do they describe that experience?

Methodology of the Study

The methodology employed in this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the perspectives of elderly Filipinos regarding life fulfillment. This design was chosen to capture the in-depth, lived experiences of the participants, focusing on their subjective perceptions of what constitutes a well-lived life. The study aimed to identify key themes related to life fulfillment by analyzing the narratives of the elderly within their socio-cultural and economic contexts.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to elicit the views of elderly Filipinos regarding the factors that contribute to a well-lived life and, most importantly, how these viewpoints influence their overall sense of life fulfillment. This study employs qualitative research, which is well-suited for exploring the in-depth lived experiences and subjective perceptions of the elderly regarding their understanding and interpretation of fulfillment. Moreover, this research design considers the meanings that key informants attribute to their experiences, with the expectation of uncovering complexities surrounding aging, well-being, and fulfillment in the Filipino context (Neubauer et al., 2019).

Key Informants of the Study

The key informants for this study comprise 15 elderly Filipinos, aged 65 to 92 years, from Central Luzon. This age range covers the “young old,” “old old,” and “oldest old” groups. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to capture a broad cross-section of experiences and opinions. The inclusion criteria required respondents to be Filipino, residing in Central Luzon, and aged 65 and above. Additionally, participants must not have demonstrated significant cognitive decline, which would mean they can engage in a coherent conversation, allowing them to demonstrate informed consent. Such a criterion will ensure that participants can adequately express their views on the concept of a well-lived life. Individuals with cognitive impairments such as dementia or Alzheimer's disease, or those experiencing severe physical or mental health crises, were excluded. Additionally, participants who were unable to communicate effectively in Filipino or English were also excluded, as effective communication is essential for capturing the depth and richness of the collected data.

Instrument of the Study

The primary tool for gathering information was a semi-structured interview guide, which explored the viewpoints of elderly Filipinos regarding the factors that constitute a well-lived life and how these factors affect their overall life fulfillment. This format allows for flexible yet focused interviewing, enabling participants to produce their thoughts and feelings in their own words. The interview guide includes open-ended questions and prompts based on the central research question, as well as probing questions developed during the study's conceptualization phase. These questions allowed participants to reflect on their life experiences and share insights about their definitions of a well-lived life, the barriers to achieving it, and their thoughts on the social, economic, and emotional factors that influence overall life satisfaction.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach enabled participants to converse spontaneously while still allowing the researcher to use the predetermined questions to maintain structure. The interview began with rapport-building questions followed by questions centered around the general notions the participants have regarding a well-lived life. Debriefing questions were also provided to provide closure and clarify any points that needed further clarification. Interviews were conducted in either Filipino or English, based on the participants' preference. For those who consented, the interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accurate transcription for analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis of transcriptions, employing a qualitative methodology, was conducted. The researchers then compressed the data into manageable units and systematically categorized them into sub-themes and themes, uncovering the elderly's perceptions of a well-lived life. It was an iterative process during which data familiarization was used to generate initial codes, identify sub-themes, and finalize and review themes, including validation of the findings through member checking and triangulation. This rigorous analytical approach has helped clarify the diverse perceptions that elderly individuals have about a well-lived life, contributing to a deeper understanding of their experiences and, thus, informing the development of interventions tailored to their needs.

By maintaining rigor and transparency, the researchers ensured that their interpretations were credible and dependable, making the study findings trustworthy. The analysis process demonstrates how successful qualitative methodology can be in uncovering rich insights into complex phenomena and generating knowledge that informs both theory and practice in older adults' perception of life fulfillment.

Ethical Consideration

Conducting research with human participants, especially those from vulnerable populations such as the elderly, raises important ethical considerations. Given that this study aims to understand life satisfaction among the elderly Filipino population, it was guided by several ethical requirements that ensure the welfare and rights of research participants are safeguarded throughout all phases of the study. Informed consent was obtained in writing, as participants received an open and comprehensive explanation of the research purpose, procedures, risks, and all the benefits before participating in this study. This procedure was conducted in a manner that respects the participants' literacy levels and cognitive skills, allowing them to make well-informed decisions about their involvement.

Personal data collected was treated confidentially. Anonymous information was ensured to be untraceable in the transcripts and reports by using pseudonyms. All written documentation and electronic and hardcopy data collected were kept safe and accessed only by authorized researchers. The creation of a safe and respectful environment in which all sensitive topics can be discussed has been carefully considered by the researchers, as some of these topics are likely to be sensitive and evoke strong emotions. Participants were encouraged to respond in full but were also informed that they could choose not to answer some questions that might cause them concern. Appropriate measures, such as debriefing, will be provided in case participants experience distress that may occur during or after the interviews. The researchers demonstrated

sensitivity to the specific vulnerabilities of the elderly, especially those who are socially isolated or have health issues, ensuring that participants felt valued and heard throughout the study. In particular, an effort was made to determine whether the participants were under undue influence or coercion when they joined the study.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics Elderly Filipinos Associate With a Well-Lived Life

Elderly Filipinos associate a well-lived life with three interconnected elements: faith in God, perseverance through life's challenges, and the success of their family, particularly their children. Faith serves as their spiritual foundation, providing guidance, strength, and meaning in old age. Perseverance reflects their resilience and hard work, often motivated by their responsibility to support and secure a better future for their families. Ultimately, the success and unity of their children validate their sacrifices, giving them a sense of fulfillment and legacy. These spiritual and familial values work together to shape their understanding of a meaningful and well-lived life.

Perceived Obstacles to a Well-Lived Life Among Elderly Filipinos

Elderly Filipinos identified several obstacles to living a well-lived life, including neglect of spirituality, lack of self-discipline, unhealthy habits, and financial difficulties. The absence of faith was seen as leading to poor decision-making, loss of motivation, and vulnerability to vices. These issues often result in financial instability and family neglect, which further diminish life satisfaction. Over time, these interconnected challenges create a cycle of regret, stress, and reduced fulfillment, especially as individuals reflect on their later years.

How Elderly Filipinos Evaluate Their Lives As Well-Lived

Elderly Filipinos evaluate their lives based on three key aspects: personal contentment through faith, family success, and reflection on sacrifice and hard work. Faith allows them to look back on life with gratitude and peace, regardless of material circumstances. The success and stability of their children serve as a major source of fulfillment and validation of their lifelong efforts. Reflecting on their sacrifices and perseverance enables them to find meaning in past hardships and affirm that their lives have been worthwhile.

Defining the Moment a Well-Lived Life Is Attained

Elderly Filipinos believe they have attained a well-lived life when they experience peace, fulfillment, and stability in spirituality, family, and personal contentment. A strong relationship with God provides moral guidance and inner peace, while witnessing the success of their children and grandchildren confirms the value of their sacrifices. Achieving emotional, relational, and financial stability allows them to feel secure and content, marking the point at which they consider their life truly well-lived.

Conclusion

The present study examined how elderly Filipinos define a well-lived life and the factors that shape their sense of fulfillment. Findings indicate that a well-lived life is viewed as an integration of spirituality, family success, perseverance, and personal contentment. These

elements are deeply interconnected and reflect cultural values and personal beliefs formed across the life course.

Spirituality as a Foundation of Fulfillment

Participants consistently identified spirituality and their relationship with God as central to life fulfillment, serving as a source of meaning, moral guidance, and resilience. This highlights the value of purpose-oriented interventions that encourage spiritual reflection, such as community-based reflection activities, gratitude practices, and legacy-sharing programs aligned with the PERMA domains of Meaning and Positive Emotion.

Family Legacy and Intergenerational Bonds

Life satisfaction was closely tied to the success and well-being of children and grandchildren, with fulfillment understood as a shared, family-centered experience. Interventions that promote family legacy—such as storytelling, intergenerational projects, and reflective writing—can strengthen relationships and support the PERMA domains of Relationships and Accomplishment.

Perseverance and Life Meaning

Resilience and perseverance in the face of hardship emerged as core to elders' sense of identity and fulfillment. These experiences suggest that meaning is often derived from sustained effort and responsibility despite adversity.

Addressing Barriers Through Community Support

Participants identified obstacles such as spiritual neglect, poor financial habits, diminished motivation, and family disconnection. These findings point to the importance of preventative education and community-based support systems to strengthen purpose, discipline, and social connectedness in later life.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, several recommendations are proposed to enhance the well-being and life satisfaction of elderly Filipinos. These focus on strengthening community involvement and identifying directions for future research to better address factors influencing life fulfillment in later life.

Community Involvement

Communities may prioritize the development of spiritual support networks, as spirituality plays a central role in how elderly Filipinos define a well-lived life. Faith-based activities such as collective worship, spiritual support groups, and reflective gatherings can provide meaning, guidance, and emotional support. Strengthening family engagement through intergenerational activities and family-centered workshops is also recommended, as life satisfaction among the elderly is closely tied to family harmony and the success of younger generations.

Addressing financial insecurity is equally important. Educational institutions, local government units, and non-government organizations may collaborate to offer

intergenerational financial literacy programs tailored to older adults. These may include workshops on budgeting, retirement planning, pension access, government benefits, and healthcare expense management. Such initiatives empower elderly individuals with practical skills, promote autonomy, and reduce a major barrier to life fulfillment.

Promoting social participation through senior citizen clubs, hobby-based groups, and community events can further enhance emotional well-being by strengthening social support networks and fostering a sense of belonging.

Directions for Future Study

Future research may examine how spirituality interacts with socioeconomic status in shaping life satisfaction among elderly Filipinos. Longitudinal studies exploring the impact of financial stability on emotional well-being may also provide deeper insight into life satisfaction across time. Investigating gender differences in perceptions of a well-lived life could further clarify how family roles and responsibilities influence fulfillment. Cross-cultural studies may help identify both universal and culturally specific determinants of well-being in old age. Additionally, research on the role of digital platforms and social media in fostering connectedness, spirituality, and family involvement among the elderly is recommended, given the growing influence of technology on social relationships.

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