

Lived Experiences on the Physical Functioning of Elderly in San Fabian, Echague, Isabela: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract: This phenomenological study, entitled "Lived Experiences on the Physical Functionality of the Elderly in San Fabian, Echague, Isabela," explored the daily living activities, self-care practices, and challenges faced by elderly residents in Brgy. San Fabian. The study aimed to determine the lived experiences of eight informants, aged 60-65, without comorbidities, and able to communicate effectively. Through interviews and unstructured questionnaires, the findings revealed that the elderly engaged in diverse routines, including household chores, hygiene, caregiving, and community activities. While some informants reported maintaining their abilities, others noted a decline due to aging, impacting their physical functionality. Physical activities like walking and Zumba were found to help maintain independence, although memory and vision changes posed challenges to medication adherence and self-care. Common challenges identified included increased fatigue, physical weakness, and health issues such as high blood pressure and cholesterol, which often limited their functionality. To cope, informants employed strategies like regular exercise, healthy eating, medical consultation, emotional support, and realistic goal-setting to manage the effects of aging and maintain a positive outlook. These findings underscored the importance of physical activity and a strong support system for older adults' well-being

Keywords: Isabela State University, Lived Experiences, Physical Functionality, Elderly, Self-Care Practices, Aging Challenges.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Physical function is the capacity to carry out instrumental as well as basic everyday tasks, and an older adult's ability to live in the community is largely dependent on their level of physical function. Physical function may be differently impacted by a number of health-related and physical factors, although these factors have not been thoroughly studied (Garber, 2010). In a model entitled Physical Assessment in Your Environment by Sowers and Tomey in 2009, physical abilities like walking, reaching, seeing, and hearing are conceptualized as physical

functioning, as are cognitive abilities like spatial orientation, short-term memory, understandable speech, and awareness.

However, in this paper, the term physical function will be used to describe the capacity of an elderly to perform activities of daily living. It is described as the routine or essential tasks that people must complete each day in order to survive. Daily living activities include activities like taking a shower, combing your hair, and brushing your teeth. Dressing, eating, and moving freely about the house are other tasks.

Moreover, aging is defined as a result of the impact of the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage over time. This leads to a gradual decrease in physical and mental capacity, a growing risk of disease and ultimately death. In addition, it is a natural and a continual process of maturation. Physical, physiological, and even psychological changes that occur as a person matures are common (World Health Organization).

Older age is also characterized by the emergence of several complex health states commonly called geriatric syndromes. They are often the consequence of multiple underlying factors and include frailty, urinary incontinence, falls, delirium and pressure ulcers. Thus, the immune system deteriorates with age, losing its capacity to fend against infections, cancer, and promote proper wound healing (Goronzky and Weyand, 2016).

According to the National Council on Aging, over 80% of senior citizens (men and women ages 65 or older) have at least one diagnosed illness or disease. In addition, nearly 70% have two or more debilitating health conditions (National Council of Aging, 2022).

Based on the latest data of World Health Organization released last December 2022, some of the common conditions in older age include hearing loss, cataracts and refractive errors, back and neck pain and osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, depression and dementia. As people age, they are more likely to experience several conditions at the same time (WHO, 2022). In addition, a unique health condition also associated with aging is frailty, which occurs when several bodily systems progressively deplete their internal reserves (British Geriatric Society, 2017). Incontinence, delirium, falls, and problems with mobility are common in frailty cases (Roedl, Wilson and Fine, 2016).

Healthy aging in older persons depends on maintaining or postponing a deterioration in physical function. In 2022, a research was conducted by Zhang and colleagues of senior Chinese community members with the goal of examining trajectory changes and predictors of declining physical function. Instrumental activities of daily living (IADL) were used to measure physical function. It has been found that changes in the trajectory of physical function were influenced by factors such as older age, male sex, poorer self-reported health status, worse visual status, more chronic diseases, poorer cognitive function, and a drop in leisure activity frequency. The rate of decrease may be accelerated by reduced hearing, lack of exercise, increased depressive symptoms, and tooth loss.

Furthermore, a considerable proportion of older Filipinos have some functional difficulty as measured in terms of self-care functional disability (difficulty in performing activities of daily living [ADL]), independent living disability (difficulty in performing independent ADL), and bed disability. Related instruments developed based on the International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health, such as the Washington Group Short

Set of Questions on Disability and the Global Activity Limitation Indicator, confirm the functional health challenges of older Filipinos.

Despite the high prevalence of poor health status measured in diverse ways, the highest proportion of older Filipinos assess themselves to be of average health. Of those who do not, more assess themselves to be in poor health than those who report their health status to be better than average (Cruz, Natividad, and Saito, 2019).

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the number of Filipinos aged 60 years and above has doubled to 9.22 million in 2020 from only 4.6 million in 2000. The Population Commission projects that 14 percent of the population 12 years from now will be senior citizens from the current 8.5 percent. In addition, recent data from the Commission on Population Development also projects that by 2030, the Philippines may have an increased ageing population (Bersales, 2024).

Thus, we cannot deny that our government needs to strengthen policies and programs that will help our elders achieve optimal physical function as they reach the gradual aging process. To ensure that our senior citizens live joyfully and comfortably, we must first assess their physical function.

In line with this, the researchers chose this study as they believe that older people are a vulnerable population that has to be taken care of. Their objective was to evaluate the elderly population's lived experiences based on perceived physical function. Consequently, this study also seeks to establish a local and community-based knowledge since data on physical function among elderly Filipinos are only limited. The researchers would conduct this study in Barangay San Fabian, a centralized community located at Echague, Isabela. The researchers chose this community as an increasing elderly population has been reported. According to the data from the Office of Senior Citizens Association (OSCA)- San Fabian Chapter, a total of 238 senior citizens with age range of 60- 65 and are residing in Barangay San Fabian, Echague, Isabela.

II. METHODS

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of elderly residents in Barangay San Fabian, Echague, Isabela, by delving into their perceptions, emotions, and interpretations to understand the essence of their physical functionality and daily lives. By immersing in the subjective realities of the participants, the research sought to capture their struggles, strengths, and adaptive mechanisms in maintaining independence despite the natural effects of aging. Through in-depth interviews and unstructured questionnaires, qualitative data were gathered from purposively selected informants aged 60-65, without comorbidities, and able to communicate effectively, ensuring that the study focused on individuals capable of articulating their experiences. Conducted during the academic year 2023-2024, the study examined how aging

influenced their ability to perform daily tasks, maintain social connections, and manage their health, while also identifying key challenges such as physical weakness, fatigue, memory decline, and health conditions like high blood pressure and cholesterol issues. Barangay San Fabian, home to 239 elderly individuals, was chosen for its accessibility, community structure, and the significant presence of elderly residents, making it an ideal setting for an in-depth exploration of aging-related experiences. The data collection process involved formal coordination with barangay officials to ensure ethical and logistical feasibility, followed by face-to-face interviews that provided firsthand insights into the participants' lived experiences, self-care practices, and support systems. Through these narratives, the study aimed to highlight how the elderly coped with the challenges of aging, including strategies like regular exercise, healthy eating, medical consultations, and social support from family and community members.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the findings, over the past three years, elderly individuals had consistently maintained a range of self-care activities to support their health and independence. Many attributed their resilience to regular prayer, which they believed provided spiritual strength and comfort, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic. They also continued to manage their personal hygiene and grooming autonomously, contributing to their sense of independence and overall well-being. Most of the elderly adhered to daily vitamin supplementation and medication, recognizing its importance for maintaining health amidst aging and associated conditions like hypertension. Diet modifications, such as reducing fatty foods and increasing the intake of fruits, vegetables, and fish, were commonly practiced to prevent health complications.

Furthermore, regular physical activities, including Zumba exercises, brisk walking, jogging, and household chores, were integral to their daily routine, promoting cardiovascular health and mental well-being. While most elders could still perform daily activities like cooking, gardening, and caring for grandchildren, some experienced challenges due to age-related physical limitations or medical conditions, such as strokes or fractures.

Moreover, common challenges faced by the elderly in San Fabian over the past three years included physical decline and comorbidities as significant factors. Many older individuals reported fatigue and tiredness, especially in hot weather, as primary challenges affecting their ability to perform daily activities. Comorbidities such as hypertension, body aches, and dizziness were also noted as key obstacles that impeded routine functioning.

To cope with these challenges, the informants adopted several strategies. Staying physically active was a key approach, as regular exercise helped maintain strength and mobility, which were crucial for performing daily activities. Eating a healthy diet was also emphasized, as it supported overall health and helped manage conditions like hypertension and high cholesterol. Seeking medical attention when necessary ensured that they received appropriate treatments and interventions for their health issues. Beyond physical strategies, emotional support and realistic goal-setting played vital roles in managing the effects of aging. Having a strong support system, including family and friends, and setting achievable goals helped the elderly navigate their limitations and maintain a positive outlook on life.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the data gathered, presented, analyzed, and interpreted, it was revealed that while many older adults continued to independently perform self-care activities and engage in regular physical exercise, they experienced various age-related physical challenges, such as fatigue, tiredness, and difficulty performing certain activities. Comorbidities like hypertension, body aches, and dizziness further contributed to these limitations, impacting their ability to function effectively in daily life.

Despite these challenges, the elderly informants adopted adaptive strategies to maintain their independence and well-being. These strategies included pacing their activities, incorporating rest periods, seeking medical care, maintaining a healthy diet, and staying physically active through exercises like Zumba, brisk walking, and jogging. Additionally, spiritual practices, emotional support from family and friends, and realistic goal-setting were crucial elements in managing their health and coping with the changes brought about by aging. These efforts not only helped them manage their health conditions but also enhanced their quality of life.

Furthermore, support from the government was crucial for less fortunate senior citizens, especially since they were at higher risk of developing cardiovascular and other diseases. Regular monitoring for hypertension and high cholesterol was also necessary, as many elderly individuals experienced these conditions. Additionally, support from family—whether financial, emotional, or physical—played a vital role in their daily well-being by providing a sense of security and encouraging them to maintain their health. Companionship from family and peers further reinforced their sense of significance and connection in their loved ones' lives.

Nevertheless, this study concluded that the elders of San Fabian, Echague experienced different physical functioning abilities. Most experienced a decline in their activities of daily living due to medical conditions and advancing age, while a minority of elders experienced no changes in their functioning.

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