

WHEEL OF LIFE AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY FROM THE LENS OF AGED PEOPLE

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Abstract

Death has always been feared, dreaded and misunderstood due to the complex emotions emanating from it. Various scientific studies and literary works have been written on this concern, and although most people choose not to discuss nor think about death, it remains inevitable. The objective of the study was to explore thoughts about death, dying, and end-of-life among the elderly living in a home care facility. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the respondents' experiences on their own terms. The selections of the key informants started by using a focused group discussion (FGD) in a large group of older people in the home care facility with the help of a gatekeeper. The research utilized a self-made semi-structured research instrument subjected to content validation by three qualified composed of two registered psychologists and a social worker. The findings revealed four pillars at the end of the tunnel based on the lived experience of the aged individual residing in a home care facility as follows: (1) personal concerns, (2) reluctance and unwillingness, (3) religiosity and spirituality, and (4) faith and good deeds. Based on the integration of the qualitative analysis, the Wheel of Life at the End of the Tunnel, an eidetic model about the end of life, was proposed that may serve as a basis for mental health programs for future studies.

Keywords: Death, Dying, End-Of-Life, Aged People, Elderly, Home Care.

Introduction

Aging is a celebration of life, the victory of public health, health care, advances in medicine, and social development over diseases that enable human life to span longer than expected and be productive citizens of their country. The word "older persons" is defined as individuals aged 65 years and above. The United Nations (2019) estimated that there were 730 million persons aged 65 years and above; this number is projected to double to 1.5 billion by 2050, and the share population increases from 6% in 1990 to 9% in 2019 and is expected to increase further to 16 percent by the year 2050. This denotes that every six people will be aged 65 years and above.

Based on the report on world population aging in 2019, the old-age dependency ratio is estimated to be more than double in Eastern and South-eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa and Western Asia, and Central and Southern Asia. Estimated, between 2019 and 2050, 9 out of 10 countries with the most significant percentage point increase in older individuals, the Republic of Korea has the highest of 23% points; next is Singapore at 20.9% points and Taiwan Province of China at 19.9% points while Spain remains the only country in Europe with the most significant increase in older individuals by 2050.

According to the Central Intelligence Agency (2016), in the Philippines, the age structures are similar to many other developing countries. There is

a more significant number of younger Filipinos than older Filipinos. However, despite many young Filipinos, it is expected that the 60 years and older population of the Philippines will increase by 4.2%. In contrast, the 80 years and older population are expected to increase by 0.4% from 2010 to 2030. Over the last two decades, the country's population escalated by over 35%. The older adult population of 60 is anticipated to overtake those 0-14 years old by 2065 (Help Age Global Network, 2017b). Filipinos take great pride in "family values," specifically how families make room and time for the elder members. In due course, Filipinos must take a second look at their cultural assumptions. For some, looking after older relatives, especially those suffering from debilitating conditions and ailments that require round-the-clock care, can be beyond their resources, such as emotional, physical, financial, and time-wise (David, 2015).

Moreover, only a handful of systematic studies are related to elderly Filipinos (Racelis et al., 2012), and aging remains an under-theorized subject because most research focuses on young age groups (Villegas, 2014). Although older Filipinos appear in the country's national reports, contemporary empirical studies incorporating older adults appear to be lacking in the Philippines. The University of the Philippines Manila is currently the only major institution where there is an established center specifically for aging research, and the majority of the research centered on older Filipinos appears to

focus on perceptions of aging, quality of life, and older adults in the workforce (Badana et al., 2018).

With the increased percentage of older persons in the population in most countries, researchers have gradually turned their attention toward death and the factors related to them (Ron, 2010). As elderly problems become more social interest, several studies have been carried out on death (Jeon et al., 2015). However, other studies affirmed that previous research concerning older person's perception of death and dying is limited (Tjernberg et al., 2016). This could be related to the researcher's desire to protect older persons, but it could also be due to the lack of interest in older peoples' last period of life. Other explanations are a lack of knowledge among staff (Towsley et al., 2015) or reluctance and/or fright to talk to an older person about death and dying (Ahlstrom et al., 2018).

Death has always been feared, dreaded, and misunderstood due to its complex emotion. Several theories about death and dying vary across cultures. The nature of death and human cognizance of its mortality ever since time immemorial has been the cause of mystery and concerns in religion, cultural traditions, and theoretical inquiry (Castano et al., 2011). Various scientific studies and literary works have been written on this concern, and although most people choose not to discuss nor think about death, it remains inevitable (Mamauag, 2019). Generally, people are afraid of death for any reason. Some of the common cause is fear of the pain of dying, fear of the unknown, fear of separation, and fear of divine judgment (Lan et al., 2017).

Death is closely related to old age as this time of life physiologically prepares many people for leaving this world. Even so, death remains a taboo subject. As cited by Wysokinski et al. (2019), people are afraid to mention it. They are thus unwilling to discuss the very phenomenon of death, for thinking about it might result in fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. In previous studies, such as Ternerstedt B (2017), older persons desire to talk about death and dying. Other researchers have found that older persons who live in nursing homes do not have the opportunity to discuss questions related to the last period of their lives (Towsley Gl t.al, 2015). Only a few studies focus on how older persons in nursing homes perceive their end of life (Osterlind et al., 2017).

Counseling Psychology, a discipline that highlights strengths and resilience in developmental challenges, is well-positioned to work toward better understanding and caring for those at the end of life (Vossler et al., 2015). Still, the lack of research in this field has hampered the knowledge of the marginalized population. The American Psychological Association (2014) has published

guidelines for clinical practice with the elderly; a literature search yielded no corresponding guidelines for competent practice for the dying.

The literature regarding older people's end-of-life preferences and experiences is limited, particularly older people (Sharp T. et al., 2013). Due to the salience of death for older adults, several researchers have examined the issues of attitudes toward death in older adults' lives. Still, the studies to date are somehow restricted in scope and sophistication, limiting the understanding of elderly individuals' attitudes toward death and their true significance in the later years. As the population of aged people and the average lifespan increases, there is also increased recognition of the need for psychological care for the elderly.

Caring for the elderly and other vulnerable members of society should be considered a collective commitment, not just in terms of social insurance and security but also in thinking about how we plan and adjust for the deviating needs of people of all ages. Life House Nursing Home is a private institution located in Baliuag, Bulacan, Philippines, which is a private institution that provides residential accommodations with healthcare, especially for older people. It is now relevant in the present time to raise and deliberate issues of aging with pragmatism and practicality without letting sentimentality get in the way of making realistic, practical, and humane decisions.

The objective of the study was to explore thoughts about death, dying, and the end of life among older persons living in-home care. The study's outcome became baseline information to formulate policy and practices and improve the education of health personnel and institutional staff that handles older individuals and mental health professionals in preparing for the end of life, death, and dying.

Theoretical Framework

The study was theoretically anchored on the Terror Management Theory proposed by Pyszczynski and Solomon, which offers a comprehensive framework to explore the counterintuitive phenomenon of less fear of death in older adults. Fundamental to the TMT is Becker's existential view that, unlike other animals, man developed refined intellectual abilities that made them aware of their predestined death (Major et al., 2016). The awareness of death is considered highly complicated because it conflicts with the primary drive towards self-preservation that humans share with most, if not all, other living organisms. TMT refers to the existential ground of human life. The primary compounds of this theory are relations between mortality experience with the fear of death and the formation of defensive mechanisms to mitigate such fear.

The awareness of inescapable death contrast with a powerful drive for continued life, creating a unique source of existential terror that other animals do not possess. According to this theory, this existential fear would impede many effective forms of thought and behavior if experienced persistently.

Individuals, therefore, had to develop a defensive psychological system geared to keeping thoughts and concerns about a death away from consciousness to limit the potential for devaluing fear of death.

TMT states that individuals respond to reminders of death by asserting judgments align with their worldview. Major et al. (2016), cited Maxwell et al. (2007), examined the elderly's responses to moral transgressions. Younger adults were reminded of death, and which they displayed harsher judgments of hypothetical transgressors, which was not observed with the elderly. It was suggested that older adults have found ways to minimize the effect of death thoughts consciously but are still influenced by these thoughts when they exist on the periphery of awareness.

Conceptual Framework

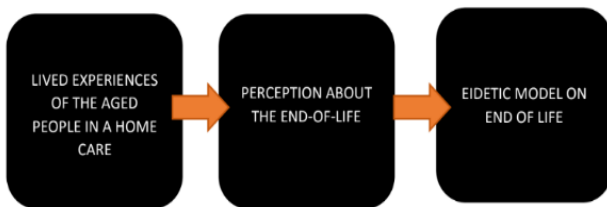


Figure 1. Conceptual Model of the Study

Figure 1 shows the conceptual model of the study. It shows that the lived experiences of aged people living in-home care affect their perception of the end of life. The results were used to develop an eidetic model crafted explicitly from the lens of the aged people living in a home care facility. The eidetic model may serve as a framework that may be a basis for crafting mental health programs for the home care staff for aged people's welfare if deemed necessary. Furthermore, the model becomes a centrality of psychosocial activities and therapeutic techniques to help the aged people to bounce back into their lives and have a healthier coping mechanism.

STATEMENT of the PROBLEM

This research aimed to determine the lived experiences from the lens of aged people residing in a home care facility about death and dying using phenomenological study. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

Central Questions

How do the key informants understand end life, death, and dying from the lived experiences of aged people?

Probing Question

1. What factors influenced your decision to remain in a home care facility?
2. How do you understand the term “death” and what is your perspective about dying in a home care facility?
3. How do you prepare as you approach the end of life?
4. What lesson/s can be learned from your experiences in overcoming fear of death and dying as an elderly person?
5. What eidetic model can be crafted to give meaning to the life of an old individual confined in the four walls of a home care facility?

Scope and Delimitation

This research aimed to produce an eidetic model regarding the end of the light from the lens of aged individuals residing in a home care facility in the Province of Bulacan. The researcher utilized focus group discussion from the group of older individuals to identify the key informants who became part of the smaller group discussion that contributed to crafting the eidetic model.

The study was conducted during the academic year 2021-2022 in a home care facility located in Bulacan, Philippines. The data collection was done in the span of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thus, the mode of the interview process was strictly complied with and adhered to the restrictions involving vulnerable groups, following the strict guidelines for both the home care institution and the graduate school of La Consolacion University of the Philippines.

Methodology

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research approach that produced a descriptive database from interviews of people and observable behaviors. Specifically, the study used phenomenological analysis to explore the underlying reasons and opinions of the aged people about their perception of end-of-life.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the respondents' experiences on their terms. It is a research approach that examines how people make sense of their significant life experiences. IPA allows multiple individuals (participants) who experience similar events to tell their stories without distortion and/or prosecution. As Creswell (2012) stated, a phenomenological study describes the ordinary meaning of several individuals' lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon. The most salient aspect of IPA is its

ability to make sense of the participants' lived experiences and allow the research study to explore the phenomenon that the research is investigating. Thus, this method best fits the researcher's objective to discover the phenomenon underlying the participants' experiences. The researcher utilized a semi-structured questionnaire submitted to the subject matter experts for validation to explore the lived experience of the participants.

Participants/Respondents of the Study

The study focused on a specific characteristic of the critical informants suited for the study. The selection of the key informants started by using a focused group discussion (FGD) in a large group of elderly persons in the home care with the help of a gatekeeper who has been with the institution and working in the elderly home since its establishment. The gatekeeper played a vital role in determining the selection of the possible key informants that fit the study's aim.

After selecting FGD, the five (5) key informants became part of the intensive interview to develop themes regarding the end-of-life eidetic model. The key informants were purposively selected based on the following inclusion criteria: (i) functionally literate and communicative (can read, write and understand either English or Filipino language); (ii) were not diagnosed with any terminal illness, cognitive/memory and mental disorders, (iii) have been in the home for the elderly for almost a year, and; (iv) should be willing to be part of the study while the only exclusion criteria are the elderly suffering from any cognitive impairment as well as those who had dementia.

Instrument/s of the Study

The research utilized a self-made semi-structured research instrument (Appendix D) subjected to content validation by three qualities composed of two registered psychologists and social worker experts in their chosen field of interest to improve the validity of an in-depth, semi-structured interview guide.

The semi-structured questionnaire interview guide underwent validation from the three expert validators, a registered social worker who has been in service for four years, and two registered psychologists, one of whom has been in service for seven years while the latter has been serving for nine years. The translation of the Filipino interview guide was also submitted to an expert holding a doctorate in Filipino so the key informants would clearly understand the main point of each question. The adviser checked the transcribed interview data's English translation, and a professional licensed English teacher grammatically checked it. The interview guide was based on the literature. The

questions specifically explored the following areas: the resident's understanding of death and dying, their lived experiences staying in the home for the aged and the changes that had happened after that, the resident's fears and concerns about death and dying, and what lesson/s can be driven based from their lived experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data was gathered from one of the homes for the aged in Bulacan. The key informants were the aged people identified as coherent and mentally stable without any severe or profound cognitive disability. A gatekeeper working from home for the aged was the one who assisted the researcher in determining the elderly who would be able to fulfill the inclusion criteria of the study. This gatekeeper was also the one who asked whether the elderly was interested in participating in the interview.

Once the target key informants agreed to participate in the study, the researcher set a schedule for the convenience and approval of the interview at home for the elderly. Ensuring that the participant's participation in the study was held voluntarily, further information about their right to withdraw without any reason or consequences, and confidentiality and anonymity clauses were provided by the researcher. The time for the questions, usually 30-60 minutes, was also provided before the elderly signed the informed consent. The participants were not exposed to any physical or emotional threat, for they were given the freedom to refuse to answer any questions that would make them feel uncomfortable.

Interviews were recorded via audio-visual equipment and were transcribed and analyzed according to Colaizzi's phenomenological method (Rivolta et al., 2014). The interview was read several times, and the main themes were identified. Debriefing was also done after the in-depth interview with the participants. The researcher adhered to strict compliance with health protocols due to the COVID-19 restrictions.

Result And Discussion

This research found out the lived experiences of the aged individual residing in home care and their understanding of end-of-life, death, and dying. The results specifically found the following:

SOP 1. What factors influenced your decision to remain in a home care facility? Personal Concern (Time, Help, and Health). The factors influencing the aged individual's decision to remain in a home care facility are their significant family members who are currently busy with their careers. Most aged individuals suffer from geriatric diseases, so they need full-time assistance.

SOP 2. How do you understand the term "death," and what is your perspective on dying in a home care facility?

Reluctance, Unwillingness, and Recognition of God. Aged individuals are reluctant to talk about death and are unwilling to share their perspectives about dying. Despite this, the aged individuals exhibit their recognition of God concerning death and dying.

SOP 3. How do you prepare yourself as you approach the end of life?

Reluctance, Unwillingness, and Belief and Faith in God. For aged individuals, it is not good or inappropriate to talk about death and to die, with this, having no preparation as they approach the end of life while still manifesting their faith in God through praying and asking for salvation.

SOP 4. What lesson/s can be learned from your experiences in overcoming fear of death and dying as an elderly person?

Faith and Good Deeds. The importance of doing good deeds, not just for others but for oneself, and conviction of faith throughout one's existence is the lesson/s that the aged individual shared to overcome the fear of death and die as an elderly.

SOP 5. What eidetic model can be crafted to give meaning to the life of an old individual confined in the four walls of a home care facility?

The Wheel of Life: Eidetic Model of Aged Individuals in Home Care Facility by Dela Rosa and Nuevo (2022) exhibits the critical components of the life of an aged individual confined in the four walls of a home care facility.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study found that the factors that influenced the aged individuals' decision to remain in a home care facility were that most of their children were currently busy with their careers, thus having no one to assist them with their needs, especially most of them were now suffering from aged related health concern. Aged individuals in a home care facility were reluctant to talk about death and dying, considering it was inappropriate to talk about this matter, therefore exhibiting no preparation for their end of life. Despite this, they still manifest their belief in God. The lesson/s that they shared focused on doing good deeds, not just for other people but for oneself, and lastly, for the aged individual, it is essential to keep faith throughout one's existence.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, the following recommendations are hereby submitted:

1. Aside from health consultations for age-related health concerns, it is recommended to conduct mental health services like counseling for the aged individual and intervention/webinar programs for the home care staff to enhance their knowledge in giving mental health support in palliative care.
2. It is recommended to propose a mental health program specifically for the aged individual residing in a home care facility to strengthen their positive coping and modify negative mechanisms regarding the end-of-life.
3. It is recommended to strengthen the government and advocacy programs for new policies for the aged individual residing in a home care facility to educate and reach a wider population through the collaboration of stakeholders.
4. The current study proposes implications for future studies, including other possible measures such as religiosity and spirituality, which is one of the emerging themes of the study's findings.
5. There was a paucity of studies investigating the association of death anxiety, spirituality, and understanding of death by the aged people in the Philippines. Hence, further studies that utilize mixed methodology should be conducted to explore the relationship between these variables.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this manuscript.

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