

Research Paper

The Lived Experiences of Aging in Older Adults: A Phenomenological Study



Leila Sadeghmoghadam<sup>1</sup>, \*Mahshid Foroughan<sup>2</sup>, Farahnaz Mohammadi Shahboulaghi<sup>3</sup>, Fazlollah Ahmadi<sup>4</sup>, Shima Nazari<sup>5</sup>, Akram Farhadi<sup>6</sup>, Masoumeh Amiri Delui<sup>1</sup>

1. Department of Nursing, Gonabad University of Medical Sciences, Gonabad, Iran.
2. Department of Aging, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
3. Department of Nursing, University Of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
4. Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.
5. Department of Nursing, School of Nursing And Midwifery, Tehran University Of Medical Science, Tehran, Iran.
6. Department of Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Bushehr university of Medical Sciences, Bushehr, Iran.



**Citation:** Sadeghmoghadam L, Foroughan M, Mohammadi Shahboulaghi F, Ahmadi F, Nazari Sh, Farhadi A, et al. [The Lived Experiences of Aging in Older Adults: A Phenomenological Study (Persian)]. Iranian Journal of Ageing. 2020; 14(4):478-493. <https://doi.org/10.32598/sija.13.10.400>

<https://doi.org/10.32598/sija.13.10.400>



**Received:** 23 May 2018  
**Accepted:** 03 Sep 2019  
**Available Online:** 01 Jan 2020

**Key words:**  
 Phenomenological study, Older adults, Lived experience

**ABSTRACT**

**Objectives** Understanding the concept of aging and its experience from the perspective of the elderly people can provide a deeper and more realistic understanding of the phenomenon and their problems and needs. The present study aims to understand and explain the lived experiences of aging in older adults living in Iran.

**Methods & Materials** This study used hermeneutic phenomenological method to gather data, and Van Manen’s method was used for data analysis. Sampling was conducted from June 2014 to August 2015 and continued until new theme were provided. Data were collected through 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with older people and then were analyzed for explaining the concept of aging.

**Results** Seven themes were extracted from the data, including the scent of deterioration, submerging in the turbulence of thoughts, lost dignity, deepened spiritual tendencies, wishing a happy life for others, transcendentalism and keeping possessions. Based on these themes, the concept of aging was explained.

**Conclusion** Older people’s perceptions of aging can provide valuable data to gerontologists and professionals in related health, education and social fields to be used for reducing the existing problems, future planning for the elderly, better communication with this group, and improving aging knowledge the quality of life aged people.

**Extended Abstract**

**1. Introduction**

In today’s advanced world, socio-economic development has slowed population growth and increased life expectancy in the world, so that the world’s elderly population has now grown

more than the population as a whole [1]. By 2050, about 21.7 percent of Iran’s population will be elderly [2].

Perception of aging is a measure of each person’s satisfaction with his or her own aging and reflects their adaptation to changes associated with aging [5]. Aging self refers to one’s understanding of the process of aging in the cultural and social structure in which he or she is

\* **Corresponding Author:**

**Mahshid Foroughan, PhD.**

**Address:** Department of Aging, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

**Tel:** +98 (21) 22180004

**E-mail:** m\_foroughan@yahoo.com

located. In fact, attention to all aspects of understanding, perception, experiencing, evaluating and interpreting the aging process itself falls within this concept [6, 7].

Much of the research on aging self has come from a variety of scientific and expert perspectives, and limited research has examined this concept from the perspective of the elderly themselves [3, 8, 9]. The description given by the elderly about this stage is undoubtedly their own direct experience of this phenomenon, and many authors believe that nurses and members of the health team can better predict the care needed to maintain the health and independence of seniors [8, 10, 11].

This study used Max Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of the elderly about the concept of aging. This approach is used to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences [12].

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Sampling was carried out from June 93 to August 94 and continued until no new data appeared in the participants' descriptions, and the researcher obtained in-depth and rich data on the phenomenon under study [13].

## 2. Materials and Methods

Immediately after completing each interview and listening to it several times, the transcripts of the interviews were written on paper and analyzed thematically. In this study, a selective approach was used to extract thematic sentences. In the process of extracting sub-themes and themes, the researcher reviewed each interview several times in order to clarify the themes. After obtaining the sub-themes and themes of each interview, the researcher merged and identified the

sub-themes and main themes of the interviews and described the phenomenon of aging in accordance with van Manen's method [13].

## 3. Results

In the present study 10 elderly people (five men and five women) with a mean age of 76.9 years participated.

Seven themes were extracted from the findings that included: breathing deterioration fragrance, immersion in vortex of thoughts, lost dignity, deepening of spiritual tendencies, wishing for happiness, transcendentalism, and keeping belongings. Based on these themes and their sub-themes, the concept of the experience of the elderly was explained. The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2 in the form of the sub-themes and main themes.

## 4. Conclusion

The experience of aging self depends on the cultural and social context of society in which aging occurs, so it is imperative to understand the phenomenon of aging in different societies [6].

The experience of elderly Iranians about the phenomenon of aging is a unique experience formed by the influence of specific cultural and social factors. The main themes of understanding aging, based on the analysis of the elderly participants in the study, are: «breathing deterioration fragrance, immersion in vortex of thoughts, lost dignity, deepening of spiritual tendencies, wishing for happiness, transcendentalism, and keeping belongings.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the elderly participating in the study

No.	Gender	Age (year old)	Marital Status	Occupation	Education	Location
1	Female	92	Widow	Housewife	Reading & writing	Mashhad
2	Male	76	Married	Tailor	Reading & writing	Gonabad
3	Female	83	Married	Retired (shoemaker)	Elementary education	Gonabad
4	Male	76	Married	Shopkeeper	Associate degree	Gonabad
5	Female	85	Widow	Housewife	Elementary education	Gonabad
6	Female	76	Widow	Housewife	Reading & writing	Gonabad
7	Female	76	Widow	Retired	Bachelor	Gonabad
8	Male	65	Married	Retired	PhD. degree	Tehran
9	Female	75	Widow	Housewife	Elementary education	Tehran
10	Male	66	Married	Retired	Associate degree	Gonabad

**Table 2.** Main themes emerged and their related sub-themes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Breathing deterioration fragrance	Lasting suffering slope of aging
Immersion in vortex of thoughts	Mental disturbance rethinking the past
Deepening of spiritual tendencies	Desire for God beneficence
Wishing for happiness	The wish of death with dignity the wish for reputation
Lost dignity	Aging blame deteriorated independence pushed to the sidelines
Transcendentalism	Maturity accepting the reality of existence and death
Keeping belongings	Management of remaining health being more cautious

The theme of "breathing deterioration fragrance" illustrates the conditions that most of the elderly under survey mentioned as their first signs of aging. Although by definition, aging means structural and functional changes that occur over time and are not due to illness or accident [15], however, the elderly in our study identified pain and illness, along with impairments, as the initial features of aging. They mentioned chronic and often unexplained pain or a type of illness that impaired physical and mental capacity (enduring suffering) as well as the decline of physical and mental ability as the onset of aging.

In a Shin et al. (2003) entitled "Study of the Experiences of Aging", the downward spiral theme emerged from the perspective of aging, indicating a gradual change and a decrease in the strength and function of the elderly. Physical changes were also another theme reported in this study that is similar to the themes in the current study [8].

In some studies, aging and disease have been considered equivalent [3, 16, 17] and have shown the association of age-related structural changes with aging as an accepted pattern in the aging experience. The fact that in some of the tools that quantitatively examine perceptions of aging, an important part of the questions point to the presence of pain and illness and impairment of physical and mental ability, confirms this notion [6].

The theme of «Immersion in the Vortex of Thoughts» implies that the elderly are mentally occupied with environmental and family issues and reviewing their past

lives and comparing them to the present. Elderly tendency to internalize emotions and thoughts and mental occupations are issues that can be justified by the theory of social withdrawal (Cummings and Henry). The theory states that elderly relationship with others decreases and at the same time they become emotionally withdrawn and turn to internal feelings and thoughts [18, 19].

Also in Ericsson's theory of psychosocial stages, in the elderly phase, whose primary task is Integrity versus Despair, rethinking about the past is justified in that at this age stage, individuals return to the past and (if they find it valuable and are able to find reconciliation between their pleasures and their regrets, and are able to find a meaning to their lives) they review it to avoid disappointment [19, 20].

Understanding aging from the perspective of the elderly who are the immediate experiencers of this concept describes the meaning and concept of aging and its constituents more explicitly, more fully and transparently.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences University in Tehran. The elderly signed the informed consent form to participate in the study and were excluded if they had withdrawn from the study during or after the interview. The principle of confidentiality of elderly information was fully respected.

Research Paper

The Lived Experiences of Aging in Older Adults: A Phenomenological Study



Leila Sadeghmoghadam<sup>1</sup>, \*Mahshid Foroughan<sup>2</sup>, Farahnaz Mohammadi Shahboulaghi<sup>3</sup>, Fazlollah Ahmadi<sup>4</sup>, Shima Nazari<sup>5</sup>, Akram Farhadi<sup>6</sup>, Masoumeh Amiri Delui<sup>1</sup>

1. Department of Nursing, Gonabad University of Medical Sciences, Gonabad, Iran.
2. Department of Aging, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
3. Department of Nursing, University Of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.
4. Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medical Sciences, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran.
5. Department of Nursing, School of Nursing And Midwifery, Tehran University Of Medical Science, Tehran, Iran.
6. Department of Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Bushehr university of Medical Sciences, Bushehr, Iran.



**Citation:** Sadeghmoghadam L, Foroughan M, Mohammadi Shahboulaghi F, Ahmadi F, Nazari Sh, Farhadi A, et al. [The Lived Experiences of Aging in Older Adults: A Phenomenological Study (Persian)]. Iranian Journal of Ageing. 2020; 14(4):478-493. <https://doi.org/10.32598/sija.13.10.400>

<https://doi.org/10.32598/sija.13.10.400>



**Received:** 23 May 2018  
**Accepted:** 03 Sep 2019  
**Available Online:** 01 Jan 2020

**Key words:**  
 Phenomenological study, Older adults, Lived experience

**ABSTRACT**

**Objectives** Understanding the concept of aging and its experience from the perspective of the elderly people can provide a deeper and more realistic understanding of the phenomenon and their problems and needs. The present study aims to understand and explain the lived experiences of aging in older adults living in Iran.

**Methods & Materials** This study used hermeneutic phenomenological method to gather data, and Van Manen’s method was used for data analysis. Sampling was conducted from June 2014 to August 2015 and continued until new theme were provided. Data were collected through 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with older people and then were analyzed for explaining the concept of aging.

**Results** Seven themes were extracted from the data, including the scent of deterioration, submerging in the turbulence of thoughts, lost dignity, deepened spiritual tendencies, wishing a happy life for others, transcendentalism and keeping possessions. Based on these themes, the concept of aging was explained.

**Conclusion** Older people’s perceptions of aging can provide valuable data to gerontologists and professionals in related health, education and social fields to be used for reducing the existing problems, future planning for the elderly, better communication with this group, and improving aging knowledge the quality of life aged people.

**Extended Abstract**

**1. Introduction**

In today’s advanced world, socio-economic development has slowed population growth and increased life expectancy in the world, so that the world’s elderly population has now grown

more than the population as a whole [1]. By 2050, about 21.7 percent of Iran’s population will be elderly [2].

Perception of aging is a measure of each person’s satisfaction with his or her own aging and reflects their adaptation to changes associated with aging [5]. Aging self refers to one’s understanding of the process of aging in the cultural and social structure in which he or she is

\* **Corresponding Author:**

**Mahshid Foroughan, PhD.**

**Address:** Department of Aging, University of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, Tehran, Iran.

**Tel:** +98 (21) 22180004

**E-mail:** m\_foroughan@yahoo.com

located. In fact, attention to all aspects of understanding, perception, experiencing, evaluating and interpreting the aging process itself falls within this concept [6, 7].

Much of the research on aging self has come from a variety of scientific and expert perspectives, and limited research has examined this concept from the perspective of the elderly themselves [3, 8, 9]. The description given by the elderly about this stage is undoubtedly their own direct experience of this phenomenon, and many authors believe that nurses and members of the health team can better predict the care needed to maintain the health and independence of seniors [8, 10, 11].

This study used Max Van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenology to explore the lived experiences of the elderly about the concept of aging. This approach is used to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives and experiences [12].

Participants were selected based on purposive sampling. Sampling was carried out from June 93 to August 94 and continued until no new data appeared in the participants' descriptions, and the researcher obtained in-depth and rich data on the phenomenon under study [13].

## 2. Materials and Methods

Immediately after completing each interview and listening to it several times, the transcripts of the interviews were written on paper and analyzed thematically. In this study, a selective approach was used to extract thematic sentences. In the process of extracting sub-themes and themes, the researcher reviewed each interview several times in order to clarify the themes. After obtaining the sub-themes and themes of each interview, the researcher merged and identified the

sub-themes and main themes of the interviews and described the phenomenon of aging in accordance with van Manen's method [13].

## 3. Results

In the present study 10 elderly people (five men and five women) with a mean age of 76.9 years participated.

Seven themes were extracted from the findings that included: breathing deterioration fragrance, immersion in vortex of thoughts, lost dignity, deepening of spiritual tendencies, wishing for happiness, transcendentalism, and keeping belongings. Based on these themes and their sub-themes, the concept of the experience of the elderly was explained. The findings are presented in Tables 1 and 2 in the form of the sub-themes and main themes.

## 4. Conclusion

The experience of aging self depends on the cultural and social context of society in which aging occurs, so it is imperative to understand the phenomenon of aging in different societies [6].

The experience of elderly Iranians about the phenomenon of aging is a unique experience formed by the influence of specific cultural and social factors. The main themes of understanding aging, based on the analysis of the elderly participants in the study, are: «breathing deterioration fragrance, immersion in vortex of thoughts, lost dignity, deepening of spiritual tendencies, wishing for happiness, transcendentalism, and keeping belongings.

**Table 1.** Demographic characteristics of the elderly participating in the study

No.	Gender	Age (year old)	Marital Status	Occupation	Education	Location
1	Female	92	Widow	Housewife	Reading & writing	Mashhad
2	Male	76	Married	Tailor	Reading & writing	Gonabad
3	Female	83	Married	Retired (shoemaker)	Elementary education	Gonabad
4	Male	76	Married	Shopkeeper	Associate degree	Gonabad
5	Female	85	Widow	Housewife	Elementary education	Gonabad
6	Female	76	Widow	Housewife	Reading & writing	Gonabad
7	Female	76	Widow	Retired	Bachelor	Gonabad
8	Male	65	Married	Retired	PhD. degree	Tehran
9	Female	75	Widow	Housewife	Elementary education	Tehran
10	Male	66	Married	Retired	Associate degree	Gonabad



**Table 2.** Main themes emerged and their related sub-themes

Main Theme	Sub-Theme
Breathing deterioration fragrance	Lasting suffering slope of aging
Immersion in vortex of thoughts	Mental disturbance rethinking the past
Deepening of spiritual tendencies	Desire for God beneficence
Wishing for happiness	The wish of death with dignity the wish for reputation
Lost dignity	Aging blame deteriorated independence pushed to the sidelines
Transcendentalism	Maturity accepting the reality of existence and death
Keeping belongings	Management of remaining health being more cautious

The theme of "breathing deterioration fragrance" illustrates the conditions that most of the elderly under survey mentioned as their first signs of aging. Although by definition, aging means structural and functional changes that occur over time and are not due to illness or accident [15], however, the elderly in our study identified pain and illness, along with impairments, as the initial features of aging. They mentioned chronic and often unexplained pain or a type of illness that impaired physical and mental capacity (enduring suffering) as well as the decline of physical and mental ability as the onset of aging.

In a Shin et al. (2003) entitled "Study of the Experiences of Aging", the downward spiral theme emerged from the perspective of aging, indicating a gradual change and a decrease in the strength and function of the elderly. Physical changes were also another theme reported in this study that is similar to the themes in the current study [8].

In some studies, aging and disease have been considered equivalent [3, 16, 17] and have shown the association of age-related structural changes with aging as an accepted pattern in the aging experience. The fact that in some of the tools that quantitatively examine perceptions of aging, an important part of the questions point to the presence of pain and illness and impairment of physical and mental ability, confirms this notion [6].

The theme of «Immersion in the Vortex of Thoughts» implies that the elderly are mentally occupied with environmental and family issues and reviewing their past

lives and comparing them to the present. Elderly tendency to internalize emotions and thoughts and mental occupations are issues that can be justified by the theory of social withdrawal (Cummings and Henry). The theory states that elderly relationship with others decreases and at the same time they become emotionally withdrawn and turn to internal feelings and thoughts [18, 19].

Also in Ericsson's theory of psychosocial stages, in the elderly phase, whose primary task is Integrity versus Despair, rethinking about the past is justified in that at this age stage, individuals return to the past and (if they find it valuable and are able to find reconciliation between their pleasures and their regrets, and are able to find a meaning to their lives) they review it to avoid disappointment [19, 20].

Understanding aging from the perspective of the elderly who are the immediate experiencers of this concept describes the meaning and concept of aging and its constituents more explicitly, more fully and transparently.

## Ethical Considerations

### Compliance with ethical guidelines

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Social Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences University in Tehran. The elderly signed the informed consent form to participate in the study and were excluded if they had withdrawn from the study during or after the interview. The principle of confidentiality of elderly information was fully respected.

### **Funding**

This research did not receive any funding from public, private, and non-profit organizations.

### **Authors' contributions**

All authors have contributed to the preparation of this article.

### **Conflicts of interest**

According to the authors, this article has no conflict of interest.