

Perceived Quality of Life and Psychological Well-being: A Predictive of Distress and Suicide among Elderly Farmers in Idukki District, Kerala

Communication & Journalism Research
8 (2) pp 47-56
©The Author (s) 2019
Reprints and Permissions:
masscomhod@uoc. ac. in
ISSN 2348 – 5663

Agnes Sebastian*

Postgraduate in Applied Psychology, Pondicherry University, Puducherry, India

Basil P.V

Research Scholar, Centre for Studies in Sociology, Gandhigram Rural Institute-DU. Gandhigram, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

An escalation in longevity and a downfall in fertility have contributed to a proportionate increase in the geriatric population in India. This demographic transition is more prevalent in Kerala than in any other state of India and hence around a fifth of the population is above sixty years of age which is the highest in the country. As regards rural and urban areas, a major proportion of the elderly population lives in rural areas. Idukki is one of the least developed areas and the occupation of the majority of its population is agriculture. Farmer suicides are a grave issue in the Idukki district. Quality of life and psychological well-being has the potential to influence elder farmers' evaluations of their life. This qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with 20 rural elderly farmers (aged 60 to 78 years). Thematic analysis generated key themes. Findings indicated the majority of elderly participants experience low to moderate levels of quality of life and psychological wellbeing. Financial stability and occupational characteristics were found to be two significant elements that affect QOL and the psychological well-being of rural elderly farmers.

Keywords

Quality of Life, Psychological Well-being, Farmers, Elderly

Introduction

As the longevity of individuals is increasing due to several transitions in society, greater consideration is given to addressing the geriatric population. Meanwhile, developing countries such as India fail to concentrate on this aspect although it is a matter of inescapable importance, because of differences in priorities and higher population density. A major proportion of the elderly Indians live in rural areas, accelerating the gravity of the crisis. One of the most disadvantaged sections of them,

* Correspondence: Email: post4agnes@gmail.com

which is the aging farmers who form most of the elderly in this developing country do not receive much attention.

Agrarian crisis and farmers' distress is apparent in the reports of farmer suicides from various states of India, particularly Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra since it is small farmers who are more vulnerable to crop failure and the vagaries of the market such as falling prices, and the higher their proportion in the region, the higher are the casualties (Mohankumar & Sharma, 2006). The occurrences are further worse for the farmers who still work in the fields but are aged and experience health issues because Senior farmers suffer a disproportionate number of injuries and the highest fatal injury rate of all age groups who farm. Reduced strength and flexibility, vision problems, hearing loss, the onset of a chronic illness, and depression may limit a senior farmer's physical capabilities to farm safely (Cole and Donovan, 2008).

Idukki is one of the least urbanized districts of Kerala and the majority of its population are small farmers who depend on agriculture to meet their livelihood. Farmer suicides are a grave issue in the Idukki district. Eight farmer suicides were reported in Idukki during the first quarter of 2019 (Press Trust of India, 2019). An interesting observation is that the Majority of farmers who killed themselves were elderly, (Correspondent, 2019) which justifies the information obtained from previous researches that vulnerability to commit suicide increases with age (Shah, 2007). Older people may have less access to opportunities for continued growth and development, which may affect their perceptions about their life. Life can be worse for elder farmers from rural communities, than others as they have lower educational levels, lower retirement pensions in agriculture, (Raju, 2002) geographical isolation with lack of public transportation and limited access to stores and services, and barriers to obtaining health care, with growing desertification of medical and paramedical professionals leading to rudimentary life conditions.

About seventy percentage farmers who committed suicide in Idukki were elderly while three were in their late 50s. This trend may be the result of a recent demographic transition. According to Durkheim, suicide is an effect of individualization, a process of socioeconomic "estrangement" from agrarian communities experienced by rural producers in the context of rapid economic growth. Elderly farmers from rural communities like Idukki have to manage to survive these transitions along with their existing burdens associated with economic, political, social, and environmental factors such as the shift of food grain to commercial cash crops, high cost of cultivation, low productivity, high land cost, and the conversion of paddy fields.

A healthy mind can alleviate the impact of present-day circumstances. However, the recent trends in Idukki associated with farmer suicides have been shown to be an indication of a different scenario. Well-being, particularly psychological well-being

may be affected by physical helplessness, economic insecurity, loneliness, lack of social support, and health complaints which are common sufferings of elder farmers in Idukki. Psychological well-being decreases with increasing age (Yuriko & Masumi, 2003). Hence, it is important to identify current well-being aspects of senior farmers in Idukki to take necessary steps to provide needed support for them to prevent further suicides.

The psychological well-being of an individual can be defined as the evaluation of his or her own life (Ryff et al, 1989). It is an important impression of successful adaptation during old age. Psychological well-being refers to the extent to which people feel that they have meaningful control over their life and their activities. It is a eudemonic approach that stresses the role of having a purpose in life. Well-being status of elder farmers rests heavily on evaluations of their own life. The human experience is the basis for learning, which may be expressed in their perceptions of their quality of life.

Quality of life (QOL) is a subjective construct that involves both physical and psychological aspects. It can be defined as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns. This is a very broad concept which is influenced by complex ways and complex issues than the physical health of the individual, his psychological state, level of independence, their social relationships and their relationship with the environment” (World Health Organization, 1996). Aged farmers experience poor quality of life in rural areas (Sammy, 2013) such as Idukki and the evolutionary transitions can be a major cause (Bhawana Singh and U.V. Kiran, 2013).

To encapsulate, Increasing suicides among elderly farmers in Idukki demand special attention. Demographic transitions such as the emergence of nuclear families, migration of youth and middle-aged, and the changes in the lifestyle of women from caregivers to work settings along with accelerating crisis in the agrarian sector such as the shift of food grain to commercial cash crops, high cost of cultivation, low productivity, high land cost, and the conversion of paddy fields create the life of elderly farmers miserable (Jamuna, 1989). Chronic stress associated with these factors during old age has the potential to disturb a person's perceptions of oneself, and of his or her environment as it is a period of declined physical and cognitive abilities as a result of the aging process. This may affect their quality of life as well as their current and future well-being. Even though they are the backbone of a developing country like India, few studies have attempted to make the understanding of the quality of life and well-being among elderly farmers, specifically in Idukki, who are the suppliers of spices to the world.

Methodology

The present qualitative study explores the quality of life and psychological well-being among elderly farmers in Idukki district, Kerala. Using the purposive sampling method, 20 elderly farmers, 10 males and 10 females living in a home environment from Idukki district were selected for the present study. Information about elderly farmers in Idukki was collected from ward members and Krishibhavan. Consent was obtained from both participants as well as their children. Semi-structured interview method was used to collect information and interviews continued until the researcher found that no new themes are emerging. Responses for each question were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate the data and generate themes. Information from Semi-structured interviews was transcribed. Key quotes were highlighted, coded, and sorted into themes. Inductive reasoning was used in which the themes and categories emerged from the data.

Themes Identified

Six themes were identified on quality of life and another six themes were identified on psychological wellbeing. Physical health, social life, sense of safety and security, educational qualification, perceptions about occupation, and perceptions about the quality of life were the themes identified on quality of life. Elf development, satisfaction with life, the meaning of life, spirituality, acceptance and adaptation, and motivation were the themes identified in psychological wellbeing.

Variable	Themes
Quality of Life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Physical health · Social life · Sense of safety and security · Educational qualification · Perceptions about occupation · Perceptions about quality of life
Psychological Wellbeing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Self development · Satisfaction with life · Meaning of life · Spirituality · Acceptance and adaptation · Motivation

- **Physical Health**

All the elderly farmer participants reported weak health conditions. Compared to males, the health state was poor among women though they

can manage their day-to-day activities. Male elderly farmers suffered more in terms of memory issues. Memory loss, Back pain, damaged eyesight, diabetes, blood pressure, and cholesterol are common health problems faced by elderly farmers in the Idukki district. Few researchers observed similar diseases and disabilities that may limit farmers' physical capabilities to farm safely (Cole and Donovan, 2008).

- **Perceptions about Quality of Life**

According to these twenty rural elderly farmer participants, quality of life implies financial stability, a good job that provides a stable income, preferably a government job, and a good house. In terms of financial stability, none of the participants have a sense of security. Hence perceptions about their quality of life are low. Even the occurrence of natural calamities or climate change may affect their sense of security and they have been living in a state of constant uncertainty. Their occupation is the ultimate cause of their sense of the low quality of life. Among 20 participants, 18 strongly believed that their quality of life is low. Rashmi Kumari et.al, 2018).

- **Perceptions about Occupation.**

As the participants were selected from the same economic and occupational backgrounds, they all shared the same perceptions on this theme. No one was happy with the job they were doing. There was no distinction between males or females. All strongly believed that agriculture is a profession that won't bring any financial security.

- **Educational Opportunities.**

Although the selected participants were literate, high school was the highest level they attended. As Idukki is a rural area, higher education options were limited and expensive. Three of them chose agriculture as a profession by themselves inspired by their fathers. Females gave less importance to education. They shared a strong feeling that their job is to look after their husbands and children.

- **Social Life**

Elderly farmers from rural areas of Idukki have limited social life. Males and females deal with their relationships differently. Most of them do not share their personal concerns and worries with friends and keep them within themselves as they have only peripheral friends. Hence, majority of them are family oriented. Yet it is their habit to go to town in the evenings and

share general things with others. Besides, they also reported that as the graph of age goes up, the number of close friendships are going down. All ten female participants believe that they should restrict themselves to their families. Hence their social life is limited. Occasional meetings with other women from neighbourhoods are the only external connections they have (Vijaiyalakshimi and Rani, 2016).

- **Sense of Safety and Security**

participants associated their sense of security and safety with financial stability that they lack as their profession is agriculture. The prevailing uncertainty makes their life unpredictable and unstable.

Themes identified on psychological wellbeing are;

- **Self Development**

Participants agreed that they have developed over years as a person in spite of any gender differences. Feeling of self-development is more intense among males than among females. It was observed from in-depth interviews that, male farmers have this feeling that they faced lots of struggles and survived from them that contributed to their development as a person. Females were passive while males were actively involving in the battle with life.

- **Satisfaction with Life**

Besides any gender difference, participants expressed deep regrets about their life even though there were exceptions. This regret came out of their feeling that life didn't turn in the way they want. The basic cause is that they planned many things and they achieved only few things. Even at this stage majority of them have worries about future as they have financial burdens to deal with and low production from agriculture due to climatic variations. The exceptional participant reported that, apart from all the hurdles they learned several things.

- **Meaning of Life**

Participants find meaning in life as they could educate their children well. They have a sense of fulfilment when they talk about their children. Gender difference didn't make any change in this aspect. Participants struggled hard and faced many obstacles. While thinking that it was to provide their children with a comfortable life, elderly farmers feel a sense of

fulfilment. In all other aspects, as a feeling of insecurity persists, as they couldn't reach financial stability, majority face distress and futility.

- **Spirituality**

Spirituality level of participants ranges from moderate to high. For females, faith and trust in God that makes their life move forward. Spirituality of females was observed to be custom and ritual oriented. The more they follow customs, the more they feel gratified. Furthermore, Spirituality rests at an awareness level among elderly males. For them it is a way of life. Doing good deeds and not deceiving others brings happiness for many of them. They gained this morale from their religion. Following a value system that is formed though years is what spirituality meant for elderly farmers.

- **Acceptance and Adaptation**

A significant gender difference was observed on this facet. Among the female participants, eighty percent showed high ability to accept and adapt to novel situations. Though they do not wish to change their existing living style and habits, these ladies are flexible enough to adjust and adapt. It was observed that they are more open to changes. The same was the attitude of other six women. But two of them were rigid like men. They expressed low tolerance level for novel experiences. However, Male participants had the feeling that any change in their current life style would be stressful and they would struggle to adjust with it. Sometimes certain situations strongly demand a change from existing routines and patterns. If there is no other option, each male participant has to follow it.

- **Motivation**

From the in depth interviews it was observed that motivation changes from person to person. Though this aspect was unique for each participant, seven male participants expressed low motivation. They are not ready to work again with optimism to advance further. Financial insecurity is a major issue of elderly farmers from Idukki. Consequently, these seven participants are not ready to look forward and plan again. One of the significant reasons behind this trend is that though these farmers worked, they couldn't reach to the calculated or expected level of success. That demotivated them from keeping further optimistic attitude towards life. On the other hand, as females are not expected to take initiatives in Indian scenario, the situation is not different in Idukki.

Rural elderly farmers are a group of individuals who need special attention. Social life of participants was observed to be very low as majority are hesitant to share personal things with others, even with their family. Many attach their purpose and meaning in life with financial security and hence their sense of safety and security is threatened.

Conclusion

Overall findings from this research of elderly farmers suggest that older farmers in general experience lower to moderate quality of life in Idukki. Farmers attributed occupational characteristics to their lower quality of life. Agriculture is a profession where uncertainty and unpredictability prevail. A mild climatic change or unexpected natural disaster is enough to threaten their calm and peaceful life. Popular stereotypes regarding rural life as it is more peaceful and less stressful than urban life needs to change. Immediate attention has to be given to this population. Despite health issues and other disabilities, elder farmers are forced to work in fields as they have to deal with financial burdens which are accumulated due to various reasons. Each farmer's perceptions about their quality of life depend largely on their financial security. Hence their sense of safety and security is affected. This may be an important reason behind increased farmer suicides in Idukki.

The eudemonic perspective of well-being among elderly farmers was analyzed through the lenses of psychological well-being. Self-development, satisfaction with life, meaning of life, spirituality, acceptance and adaptation and motivation were the themes identified. Each of the participants strongly believed that they have developed over years. On the other hand, majority of them are not receptive to novel situations or events that demand a change in existing lifestyle and habits. Only few of them were motivated to set goals, plan again for a better future and grab opportunities. Rest majority wanted to sit back and watch the flow of life, leaving everything in the hands of fate because they worked hard to achieve their dreams but failed. Spirituality is the route through which elder farmers, especially women deal with uncertainty associated with their profession.

In a nutshell, Elderly farmers in Idukki are a group of individuals who need special attention and support. They range between low to medium in terms of quality of life and psychological wellbeing. Financial struggles due to low-income occupation and unpredictability and the resulting stress may be the reason behind increased farmer suicides in Idukki district, Kerala.

References

- Cole, H. P., & Donovan, T. A. (2008, August 28). Older Farmers' Prevalence, Capital, Health, Age-Related Limitations, and Adaptations. *Journal of Agromedicine*, 13(2), 81–94. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10599240802125680>

- Correspondent, O. (2019b, February 27). *In two months, 7 farmers commit suicide in Idukki | Kerala News | English Manorama*. OnManorama. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.onmanorama.com/news/kerala/2019/02/27/farmer-sicides-idukki-kerala.html>
- Jamuna, D. (1989). Psychological perspectives of the problems of rural elderly women. *Aged in India: Socio Demographic Dimensions*. New Delhi: Ashish Publishing House
- Kuruvilla, P. K. (2010). Old-age insecurity: How far does the “Parents and Senior Citizen’s Act of 2007” address the problem?. *Indian journal of psychiatry*, 52(4), 298.
- Mohanakumar, S., & Sharma, R. (2006). Analysis of Farmer Suicides in Kerala. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 41, 1553-1558. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4418114>.
- Morrison, Ken, 1995, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Foundations of Modern Social Thought, London: Sage.
- Mudey, A., Ambekar, S., Goyal, R. C., Agarekar, S., & Wagh, V. V. (2011). Assessment of quality of life among rural and urban elderly population of Wardha District, Maharashtra, India. *Studies on Ethno -Medicine*, 5(2), 89-93.
- Praveen, V., & M, A. (2016). Quality of life among elderly in a rural area. *International Journal of Community Medicine and Public Health*, 754–757. <https://doi.org/10.18203/2394-6040.ijcmph20160646>
- Press Trust of India. (2019b, February 28). *Unable To Repay Loans, 8 Kerala Farmers Commit Suicide Since January*. NDTV.com. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.ndtv.com/kerala-news/unable-to-repay-loans-8-farmers-commit-suicide-in-keralas-idukki-2000798>
- Raju, S. S. (2002). Meeting the needs of the older poor and excluded in India. *Situation and Voices*, 93.
- Ramamurti, P. V., & Jamuna, D. (1992). *Markers of Successful Ageing Among Indian Sample*. Switzerland: Sandoz Project Report
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Beyond Ponce de Leon and life satisfaction: New directions in quest of successful ageing. *International journal of behavioral development*, 12(1), 35-55.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 57(6), 1069.
- Ryff, C. D. (1989). In the eye of the beholder: Views of psychological well-being among middle-aged and older adults. *Psychology and aging*, 4(2), 195.
- Ryff, C. D., & Keyes, C. L. M. (1995). The structure of psychological well-being revisited. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 69(4), 719.
- Ryff, C. D., & Singer, B. H. (2006). Best news yet on the six-factor model of well-being. *Social Science Research*, 35(4), 1103-1119.

- Ryff, C. D., Keyes, C. L., & Hughes, D. L. (2003). Status inequalities, perceived discrimination, and eudaimonic well-being: Do the challenges of 48 minority life hone purpose and growth?. *Journal of health and Social Behavior*, 275-291
- Shah, A. (2007b, April 16). The relationship between suicide rates and age: an analysis of multinational data from the World Health Organization. *International Psychogeriatrics*, 19(06). <https://doi.org/10.1017/s1041610207005285>
- Sharma, M. L., & Dak, T. M. (Eds.). (1987). *Aging in India: Challenge for the society*. South Asia Books.
- Singh, Bhawana & Kiran, UV. (2013). Psychological well being during old age. *Advance Research Journal of Social Science*. 4. 170-174.
- Thekiso, S. M., Botha, K. F. H., Wissing, M. P., & Kruger, A. (2013). Psychological Well-Being, Physical Health, and the Quality of Life of a Group of Farm Workers in South Africa: The FLAGH Study. *Cross-Cultural Advancements in Positive Psychology*, 293–313. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6368-5_14
- WHO Quality of Life Assessment Group. (1996). What quality of life?. *World Health Forum* 1996 ; 17(4) : 354-356 <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/54358>
- Yuriko D, Masumi M. (2003). Factor structure of the 12 item General Health Questionnaire in the Japanese general adult population. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences*, 57: 379-383.