
A STUDY OF ELDERLY LIVING IN OLD AGE HOME OF PUNJAB, INDIA.

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ABSTRACT

In India, where family is traditionally seen as the primary support system for the elderly, the growing trend of elderly people residing in old age homes marks a significant social change. Rapid urbanization, modernization, changing family structures, and migration of the younger population for employment have collectively contributed to the rising number of elderly individuals seeking shelter and care in old age homes. Increasing numbers of elderly people in Punjab are being placed in institutional care facilities due to various socio-economic, emotional, and health-related reasons. Many face Aging is an inevitable biological process accompanied by a decline in physical strength, mental agility, and social activity issues like neglect, loneliness, poor health, and financial insecurity, making old age homes their only option for shelter and care. Old age homes in Punjab vary widely in terms of infrastructure, facilities, and services provided. Some offer basic accommodation and meals, while others provide medical care, recreational activities, and emotional support. However, limited research exists on the living conditions, health status, and emotional well-being of the elderly residing in these homes. This study aims to conduct thematic assessment of the socio-economic background, health status, psychological well-being, and overall living conditions of the elderly in old age homes across Punjab. By examining their needs, challenges, and levels of satisfaction with the services provided, the research seeks to offer evidence-based recommendations to improve the quality of life of elderly residents. Understanding the current scenario is crucial for policymakers, social workers, and healthcare providers to address the gaps in eldercare services and ensure the dignity, care, and emotional security of the aging population. The study adopted a **qualitative phenomenological research design** grounded in an interpretivist paradigm to explore the lived experiences of elderly residents in old age homes in Bathinda district, Punjab. Data were collected through **face-to-face semi-structured interviews**, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, with elderly participants aged 60 years and above. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and verified through member checking to ensure credibility. The collected data were analyzed using **thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)** to identify patterns and themes reflecting the participants' lived experiences. The findings revealed that the experience of living in an old age home is **complex and paradoxical**, characterized by a balance between **security and emotional loss**. Four major themes emerged: structured daily routines that provide stability but reduce autonomy; transformation of social relationships with staff, residents, and family members; emotional challenges such as loneliness, loss of identity, and feelings of abandonment; and the development of coping strategies including spirituality, social interaction, and acceptance. Overall, residents experienced institutional life as a **transitional space offering physical safety but often lacking emotional belonging and a sense of home**.

Keywords – Old Age Home, Elderly living, lived experience.

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape is undergoing a significant demographic shift, marked by a rapidly expanding elderly population (Jane Osareme et.al 2024). In India, this trend is particularly pronounced, with the proportion of individuals aged 60 years and above projected to grow substantially in the coming decades. This demographic evolution brings with it a unique set of social, economic, and healthcare challenges (Agarwal et.al 2016).

Historically, Indian society has been characterized by strong multi-generational family units, where elders were traditionally cared for within the family home. However, contemporary socio-economic transformations, including rapid urbanization, industrialization, the migration of younger generations for work, and the increasing nuclearization of families, have progressively eroded these traditional support systems (Malik, et.al 2021). As a result, institutional care, such as old age homes (OAHs), is becoming an increasingly common and, at times, necessary alternative for many elderly individuals who either lack familial support or whose families are unable to provide adequate care due to various constraints (Jackson ,2026).

Punjab, a state deeply rooted in its cultural heritage but also experiencing the impacts of modernization and widespread diaspora, mirrors these national trends. While old age homes are proliferating across the state, offering essential shelter and basic amenities to vulnerable seniors, the transition from a familiar home environment to an institutional setting is often a profoundly transformative and emotionally complex journey (Fisher, 1995). While some research quantifies aspects of institutional care, there is a critical need to delve into the intrinsic, personal narratives of those living within these spaces (Berendonk et.al , 2019).

The demographic landscape of India is undergoing a significant transformation, marked by a rapidly expanding elderly population. This shift challenges the traditional Indian societal structure, which historically emphasized multi-generational family units as the primary source of eldercare. Literature indicates that while cultural values like filial piety remain significant, their practical application is increasingly strained by contemporary socio-economic factors such as rapid urbanization, the migration of younger generations, and the growing prevalence of nuclear families. These dynamics collectively contribute to an evolving eldercare paradigm, often necessitating alternative arrangements beyond the immediate family, with particular nuances evident within Punjab's distinct socio-cultural environment.

CONCEPT OF OLD AGE HOMES

The proliferation of old age homes (OAHs) across India, and specifically within Punjab, is a direct consequence of the aforementioned societal changes. Research highlights various factors driving this growth, including the inability of families to provide adequate care, lack of family support, and the desire for specialized care or companionship. The literature differentiates between various types of OAHs—governmental, NGO-managed, and private—each offering distinct provisions. Despite their

critical role in providing shelter and basic services, societal perceptions often portray OAHs as a last resort, occasionally carrying a stigma that contrasts sharply with traditional family-based care.

Existing research on challenges faced by elderly in institutional settings

Existing research consistently identifies a myriad of challenges confronting elderly individuals residing in institutional settings. Psychologically and emotionally, residents frequently experience profound loneliness, depression, anxiety, and feelings of abandonment, coupled with a significant loss of autonomy, independence, and grief over their former home and life. Shifts in personal identity are also commonly reported. Physically, challenges include the complex management of chronic diseases, ensuring access to adequate and timely medical care, maintaining proper nutrition, addressing mobility issues, and managing chronic pain. Socially, residents often face limited opportunities for meaningful interaction, strained relationships with distant family members, difficulties in adjusting to new social environments with co-residents and staff, and pervasive feelings of isolation despite communal living. Furthermore, existential and spiritual concerns, such as questions of purpose and meaning in a new environment, and confronting mortality, are prevalent.

Quality of life and well-being in old age homes

Studies assessing the quality of life, satisfaction levels, and overall well-being of residents in institutional settings reveal a complex interplay of factors. Research indicates that while basic needs may be met, subjective well-being is heavily influenced by the availability of recreational activities, opportunities for personal space and expression, the perceived respect and empathy from staff, and the maintenance of meaningful social engagement. The emotional impact of the transition from aging in place within a familiar home environment to aging in an institution is a recurring theme, often highlighting a decline in perceived quality of life compared to community-dwelling elders.

Coping mechanisms and resilience of institutionalized elderly

The literature also sheds light on the diverse coping mechanisms and inherent resilience demonstrated by elderly individuals adapting to life within an old age home. Research explores how residents navigate this significant transition and manage daily life, including the establishment of new routines, the formation of new friendships and support networks among co-residents, active engagement in available activities, and the maintenance of a sense of purpose or continuity despite drastic life changes. These adaptive strategies are crucial for psychological adjustment and overall well-being in an institutional environment.

GAPS IN EXISTING LITERATURE AND THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL IMPERATIVE

While a growing body of research addresses aging in India, a significant and critical gap persists concerning in-depth, nuanced qualitative studies that specifically explore the lived experiences and subjective meaning-making of elderly residents within old age homes, particularly in the unique socio-cultural context of Punjab. Most existing studies, whether quantitative or broader qualitative approaches, tend to describe symptoms or demographics but do not rigorously delve into the essence of the phenomenon of institutional living from the individual's direct perspective. This study is thus

compelled by a phenomenological imperative to address this fundamental qualitative gap, aiming to provide a rich, detailed, and profound understanding of what it truly feels like to live in an old age home, as articulated by those who experience it daily.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The primary purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore and describe the lived experiences, perceptions, and the essence of what it means for elderly individuals to reside in old age homes in Bathinda district, Punjab, India. This qualitative phenomenological study is necessary due to changing family structures and the growing elderly population in Punjab, India. Traditionally, older adults in India were cared for within joint families, but urbanization, migration, and the shift toward nuclear families have weakened this support system. As a result, old age homes are becoming more common, making it important to understand the real experiences of elderly people living in these institutions.

Most existing studies use quantitative methods and focus on health status, demographics, or facilities. However, such studies do not capture the personal feelings, daily life, and emotional experiences of residents. There is a lack of qualitative research in Punjab that explores how elderly people understand and experience life in old age homes. This study seeks to fill this gap by giving voice to their lived experiences.

Due to the large-scale migration of youth from Punjab to foreign countries, many elderly parents are left without family support. They often live alone and lack adequate care and supervision. As a result, they are compelled to move to old age homes for their daily care and support.

Therefore, this study focuses on the local cultural context to generate meaningful and practical knowledge for improving the quality of life of elderly residents in old age homes in Punjab.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To describe daily life and routines of elderly residents
2. To uncover perceptions of care and social support
3. To identify challenges and coping mechanisms employed by residents
4. To explicating the essence of living in an old age home

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the daily lived experiences and routines of elderly individuals in old age homes?
2. How do elderly residents perceive their relationships and social connections with staff, other residents, and family within the old age home?
3. What emotional, psychological, and existential challenges do elderly residents encounter, and how do they cope with them?
4. What is the essence of the lived experience of being an elderly resident in an old age home?

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study is grounded in an interpretivist /constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is subjective and socially constructed. This philosophical stance is fundamental to understanding the

nuanced meanings and interpretations that individuals attribute to their lived experiences, aligning perfectly with the study's aim to explore subjective realities.

This study employed a qualitative approach within data collection and analysis procedure (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2011.) As Merriam and Grenier (2019) argue, a qualitative study aims to examine how individuals interpret their experiences and how they systematically construct their thoughts. A phenomenological design was preferred by the researchers to gather some common shared experiences of academics in different contexts in different universities. Similarly, Creswell (2012) defined this design as “describing the meaning for several individuals of their lived (or shared) experiences or a phenomenon” (p.57). In a phenomenological study understanding regarding the phenomenon is elicited, and insight is gained by interviewing knowledgeable participants (Yin, 2012). Therefore, this study was designed to explore academics' perceptions of their emotional state during their time at universities. Phenomenologically oriented research may employ a range of data collection strategies, including in-depth interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, action research, focus group discussions, and the analysis of personal documents or texts. A guiding methodological principle in such studies is the use of minimal structural constraints combined with an emphasis on obtaining maximum depth of understanding. In practice, this approach is shaped by practical considerations such as time limitations and the need to balance sustained attention to the research problem with the avoidance of excessive researcher influence on participants' responses.

The development of strong rapport and empathetic engagement is essential for eliciting rich and meaningful data, particularly when the research addresses issues of significant personal relevance to participants. Methodological discussions of interviewing techniques and related concerns have been extensively addressed by scholars such as Gorden(1969), Measor (1985), Oakley (1981), Plummer (1983), and Spradley (1979), among others.

DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURE

In phenomenological research, one of the most suitable ways of data collection is face-to-face in depth interviews with open-ended and semi-structured interview questions (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The researchers preferred face-to-face interview because according to Padilla-Diaz (2015) this kind of interview enables researchers to approach the phenomenon properly. Semi-structured interview questions allow researchers to modify the sub-questions in accordance with the answers of the participants (Creswell, 2012). Validity and reliability were ensured through methodological coherence across all stages of the study, including the literature review, data collection, analysis, and interpretation (Merriam, 2009). An extensive review of relevant literature informed the development of analytical criteria and the interview guide, which was further refined through expert consultation and probing questions. Draft interview items were subjected to peer review in line with the recommendations of Creswell (2012), followed by pilot testing, resulting in revisions and the removal of unsuitable items. Participants were provided with informed consent forms and interview protocols outlining the study procedures and their right to withdraw. Interviews were conducted primarily in

participants' natural settings, consistent with the guidance of Berg and Lune (2012), and lasted approximately 45 minutes each. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking to enhance credibility.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis primarily employs thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), a systematic process for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. This process involves verbatim transcription of audio recordings (with accurate translation where necessary), followed by repeated reading for familiarization. Initial codes are generated from significant statements and are subsequently grouped into broader categories. These categories are further refined into overarching themes that capture the essence of the lived experiences, ensuring a rigorous and insightful interpretation of the qualitative data.

RESULTS

This section reports the outcomes of a phenomenological investigation into the lived experiences of older adults living in old age homes in Bathinda District, Punjab, India. Drawing on a systematic thematic analysis of semi-structured interview data, the results highlight the core meanings and fundamental features of life within institutional settings as understood by the participants. The findings are structured around four interrelated themes, each representing a key aspect of the participants' everyday lived experience.

THEME NO. 1: THE DUALISTIC REALITY OF DAILY ROUTINES

The experience of everyday routines emerged as a key theme, marked by an underlying tension between the comfort of structure and the reduction of personal independence. The organized timetable of the institution, including set hours for meals, medication, and scheduled activities, was commonly viewed as providing reassurance and a sense of order. This structured pattern reduced worries related to managing daily life, especially for participants facing health-related difficulties. One participant expressed this feeling by stating: *The days are all the same, but in a way, that is a comfort. I always know when I will eat, when I can rest. It is a simple life now.*

Conversely, this structured existence was also perceived as a form of confinement and a stark departure from past lives defined by personal agency. The loss of a fluid, self-determined schedule created a sense of monotony, where the days were perceived as a series of events to be endured rather than actively engaged in. While some residents found purpose in new, simple activities, others expressed a persistent feeling of passivity, describing their days as being passed rather than lived. The primary challenge within this routine was the struggle to reconcile the basic physical security provided by the institution with the profound psychological and emotional need for individual control and purpose.

THEME 2: THE REDEFINITION OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

The findings indicate that life inside the old age home involves a multifaceted and evolving social environment. Participants experience a major transformation in their social relationships, marked by the gradual loss of long-standing family and community ties. At the same time, they actively develop new connections with fellow residents and caregivers within the institutional setting. This dual process reflects both emotional pain associated with separation from previous relationships and adaptive efforts to create a sense of belonging in a new social context. Together, these experiences illustrate how residents continuously negotiate between loss and renewal in their social lives.

Relationships with Staff

The quality of participants' interactions with staff played a significant role in shaping their emotional well-being. These relationships varied from strictly formal and task-focused to warm, close, and family-like connections. When participants developed an emotional bond with a caregiver, they often regarded that person as an important source of comfort and support. One resident conveyed this feeling by explaining that such a caregiver provided not only practical help but also emotional reassurance and companionship, sharing: *The doctor comes every week, but it is the young nurse who sits and talks with me for a few minutes. She is like a daughter I never had.* This highlights the importance of empathy and human connection that transcends the fulfilment of a caregiver's basic duties.

Relationships with Other Residents

The communal living arrangement created a forced social environment that led to a spectrum of outcomes. Some residents formed deep, meaningful friendships, establishing a new sense of family and community. These bonds were characterized by shared experiences, mutual support, and a collective understanding of their unique circumstances. Others, however, described feeling socially isolated, struggling to form genuine connections despite being surrounded by others. For them, the communal setting intensified their feelings of loneliness and detachment.

Relationships with Family

One of the most significant and emotionally challenging aspects of the participants' social experiences was the transformation in their relationships with family members. Relocation to an old age home was often perceived as a critical turning point that disrupted previously established family connections and altered communication patterns. Family visits gradually became more formal in nature, while phone conversations were frequently experienced as routine or superficial interactions rather than meaningful exchanges. This sense of emotional detachment was poignantly expressed by one participant, stating: *They call every Sunday, and they ask if I'm okay. But they don't ask what I feel. The connection is a thread now, not a rope.* This sentiment underscored a pervasive sense of abandonment and a profound emotional gap, regardless of the frequency of contact.

THEME 3: THE EMOTIONAL AND EXISTENTIAL LANDSCAPE

This theme delves into the inner world of the residents, encompassing their initial emotional turmoil, subsequent coping mechanisms, and their evolving understanding of home.

Emotional Challenges and Loss

The initial move to the old age home was widely described by participants as a period marked by significant emotional distress. This transition involved multiple forms of loss, including the loss of their familiar home environment, personal independence, close relationships such as a spouse or loved one, and aspects of their previous identity. Several participants also reported experiencing feelings of guilt or embarrassment, often arising from the belief that they had become a burden to their families. Feelings of loneliness and depression were frequently present, commonly expressed as a quiet and persistent sadness that participants found difficult to put into words.

Coping Mechanisms and Resilience

Despite facing significant emotional difficulties, participants demonstrated notable resilience. Their coping mechanisms included both passive and active approaches. Passive coping was reflected in their acceptance of the new circumstances and an effort to find peace in situations beyond their control. In contrast, active coping involved conscious efforts to rebuild a sense of purpose and belonging within their new environment. This was expressed through activities such as engaging in spiritual practices like prayer, participating in hobbies including reading or knitting and forming new social connections with fellow residents. Additionally, reflecting on their life experiences and expressing gratitude for their past emerged as an important source of inner strength, as one resident reflected. *My body is old, but my mind is full of memories. I spend my days with them. My life is not here, it is inside.*

The Meaning of Home

The idea of *home* emerged as a deeply meaningful theme, highlighting a clear difference between a physical living space and the emotional sense of belonging. For most participants, the notion of home remained strongly connected to their earlier lives, including their families, previous houses, and personal memories, making it something that could not easily be recreated. The old age home was generally described as merely a place to stay, such as a residence, shelter, or house, rather than being identified as a true home. This distinction reflected a significant emotional distance from their present surroundings. An elderly female resident thoughtfully expressed this sentiment: *My home is where my memories are, where my family was. This place is a house, not a home. I am here, but my soul is there.*

THEME 4: THE ESSENCE OF INSTITUTIONAL LIVING

The overall synthesis of the findings suggests that living in an old age home is a complex and paradoxical experience, often described as existing within a transitional or in-between space. Residents find themselves positioned between the closure of their previous life and an uncertain future. The central nature of this experience is shaped by the tension between feelings of security and experiences of loss. Although the institution offers a sense of physical safety and care, it often involves significant sacrifices, including reduced personal freedom, independence, and emotional ties to their familiar surroundings. Consequently, life in an old age home cannot be defined solely by satisfaction or distress; rather, it reflects an ongoing process of balancing what has been gained with what has been lost. This experience can only be truly understood by paying attention to the personal narratives and lived experiences of the residents themselves.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this phenomenological study present a comprehensive and insightful understanding of the lived experiences of elderly individuals residing in old age homes in Bathinda, Punjab. By examining institutional living through the perspectives of the participants, the study goes beyond simple descriptive data and provides a deeper and more nuanced interpretation of their everyday realities. The key themes identified—namely the dual nature of daily routines, the transformation of social relationships, and the intricate emotional and existential experiences—collectively highlight the paradoxical nature of life in institutional settings. This experience is characterized by an in-between state shaped by the tension between feelings of security and experiences of loss.

Furthermore, the results align with and contribute to the existing body of literature on institutional eldercare. The observation that structured daily routines offer residents a sense of stability and safety while at the same time limiting their personal independence supports earlier research that emphasizes the reduction of self-determination within institutional environments. However, the qualitative depth of this study brings attention to the significant psychological consequences of this dual experience. It portrays daily routines not simply as structured schedules but as lived experiences that may foster a sense of passive existence among residents. This perspective highlights an important gap in institutional care, where physical and practical needs are adequately addressed, yet the psychological and emotional well-being of residents often remains overlooked. The theme of social relationships also strongly relates to existing research that emphasizes loneliness and separation from family. The findings regarding interactions with staff indicate that compassion, empathy, and genuine human connection—rather than solely professional duties—play a vital role in shaping residents' sense of belonging and emotional comfort. This insight carries important practical implications for staff training and the development of more person-centered care models. Furthermore, the narratives describing family visits and communication—symbolically referred to as “a thread rather than a rope”—illustrate the emotional distance experienced by residents, offering a deeper understanding that quantitative measures of family contact cannot fully explain. Most importantly, the findings concerning the emotional and existential experiences of residents, particularly the continuing sense of loss and the distinction made between a *house* and a *home*, provide a meaningful phenomenological contribution. The idea of the old age home as an *in-between space* represents a conceptual advancement that reflects the participants' feeling of being positioned between a past life they can no longer return to and a future that remains uncertain and beyond their control. This interpretation goes beyond simply identifying the challenges of institutional living and instead reveals the fundamental structure of the lived experience itself.

Overall, the findings of this study carry important implications for administrators of old age homes, caregiving staff, and policymakers involved in eldercare services.

- **Person-Centered Care:** The results strongly advocate for a shift from a task-oriented model of care to a genuinely person-centered approach. Staff should be trained to provide more than just physical care, focusing on fostering empathetic relationships and engaging in meaningful conversations.
- **Enhancing Autonomy:** To counteract the monotony of institutional life, administrators should implement programs that restore a sense of purpose and autonomy. This could include allowing residents to participate in a wider range of decision-making processes, from meal choices to daily activities.
- **Facilitating Social Bonds:** OAHs should actively facilitate community-building among residents, moving beyond shared spaces to organized activities that encourage deep, meaningful connections.
- **Bridging the Family Gap:** The findings on family connections underscore the need for support systems that help families navigate this new dynamic. Programs could be developed to guide families on how to maintain emotional intimacy and meaningful communication with residents.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry, this study's findings are not statistically generalizable to all elderly individuals in India. The small sample size, while appropriate for this methodology, limits the scope of the conclusions. Furthermore, the study's focus on a single district in Punjab means the findings are deeply embedded within a specific socio-cultural context, and may not fully reflect the experiences of elders in other regions.

The findings from this study open several avenues for future research. A comparative study between old age homes in different Indian states could reveal how cultural factors influence the lived experience of institutionalization. Research exploring the perspectives of family members and OAH staff would provide a more holistic understanding of the eldercare ecosystem. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could track how residents' experiences and perceptions of home evolve over time. Finally, the findings on the importance of autonomy could form the basis for action research aimed at developing and evaluating person-centered interventions designed to improve residents' psychological well-being.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insight into the subjective experiences of elderly individuals living in institutional care, revealing not only the difficulties they encounter but also their resilience and the meaningful ways in which they interpret their lives. By emphasizing the paradoxical balance between feelings of security and experiences of loss, the research provides a deeper and more empathetic understanding of aging within an old age home setting. The perspectives gathered from these personal narratives highlight the need for caregivers, administrators, and policymakers to develop more compassionate, respectful, and supportive environments that acknowledge and uphold the dignity and complex human experiences of older residents.

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