

Preliminary results of an international study exploring and comparing positive aspects and concerns of growing older in different societies.

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With the demographic changes experienced worldwide of an increasingly ageing society the number of people now living well into their eighties is also increasing. Globally the population of 60 and older years of age is projected to reach 22% by 2050¹ with the oldest old age group (over 80 years plus) growing at the fastest rate². Although Europe has the highest proportion of 65 plus age group, Asia, Caribbean, East and North Africa and South are also set to triple by 2050². However this is a new phenomenon for many developing countries where 63% of the over 60 year olds live³. For this reason the countries included in this study were from developing countries. With this ageing population there is a need to understand and gain an insight into the older person's experiences and perceptions of growing older within their own societies in relation to their independence, choice and decision making. These in turn can help to inform government agendas and policies and help demystify some of the myths surrounding growing older.

As Watson⁴ noted ageing can be easily observed. However it is harder to explain and understand. Therefore, in an attempt to identify what is happening in different countries and cultures and to share these experiences, attitudes and perceptions from older people, this study asked people from three developing countries, from three different continents, to take part in this study. The aim was to gain an insight into the lives and perceptions of older people in relation to ageing and identify similarities and differences in different countries and cultures across the globe.

The objectives included:

- To explore the lived experiences of older people living in a variety of cultures and countries

- To identify the perception of growing older within their own cultural environment.
- To explore and contrast the views of older people within each country and across the borders
- To identify any areas where we can share cultural perspectives and good practice in the global community.

Methodology;

The study was undertaken using a qualitative phenomenological design⁵ which included questionnaires and interviews to achieve the study aims. An interpretive descriptive approach was used to explore older people's perceptions of the positive aspects of ageing and their concerns about growing older. This interpretation was undertaken using a content analysis through coding the results in order to organise the data prior to further in-depth interpretation and theming⁶.

The total sample consisted of fifty four older people who were interviewed or given a questionnaire to complete. Of these participants ten older people were from three villages in Indonesia, fifteen were from the Northern region of Tanzania, fifteen were from Iquitos in the Amazon Jungle of Peru and fourteen were from the capital city of Lima in Peru. Peru's results were split in relation to location as Iquitos is a remote Amazon Jungle town where there is limited work and participants tended to be manual workers such as farmers, whereas, those from Lima tended to be wealthier and the majority had retired from professional occupations. The reasons for identifying these as two cohorts was, as Demakakos et al⁷ found, that wealthier participants tend to report more positively in relation to ageing experiences than those from poorer parts.

All participants were aged over 60 years, and where required, local translators were used to translate the questions during the interviews. The participants, where ages were known, were aged between 60 and 89 with an average age of 72.9 years. The lower age of 60 was used rather than the usual agreed 65 plus years' criterion⁸ as Mitchell⁹ notes this mile stone of 65 plus years

does not serve well for these developing countries and as seen in this study their combined average life expectancy is currently 69.6 years.

Of these participants 22 were male and 28 females, however not all data was available from Indonesia in relation to gender. The participants were asked two questions that required three answers. These were:

1. To name three things that they were looking forward to, or now enjoying, in their later life.
2. To name three things that concerned them about getting older within their society.

These questions were asked in order to identify the older person's perceptions and experiences of growing older within their culture and environment.

Introduction

Ageing as we know is an inevitable part of life, however, as Abrams et al¹⁰ noted attitudes can affect people of all ages in relation to their perceptions of that process. This they suggest can have important implications for individual's wellbeing, age equity and social cohesion. They also note that understanding these attitudes to age is essential if we are to develop appropriate strategies and policies for an ageing population. As Watson⁴ noted that although ageing is inevitable it is not in itself debilitating but can be accompanied by mental and physical conditions that are age related which can have an effect on the individual's perceptions and experiences as they grow older.

Some older people, according to Walker¹¹, seek to gain mastery over aspects of growing older, embracing it as a friend whilst others transcend them and view them as a foe. As Schar et al¹² and Yen and Anderson¹³ also noted ageing can be associated with feelings about locality and space and contribute significantly to a person's quality of life. They all also note that the locality should be taken into account when exploring quality of life issues when reviewing old age as Barrett² also suggested the complexities of the relationships between individuals, communities and their environments can in turn be shaped by one another. Therefore there is a need to

understand how older people perceive ageing within their own society and include positive aspects as well as identifying their concerns in order to assist them to engage in their experience of transforming the ageing process and help us gain an insight in to this area.

Abrams et al¹⁰ noted that people often delay in preparing for later life and that there are huge divergences in perceptions of age boundaries with individuals psychologically delaying the category 'old' as they advance in years. Therefore, by reviewing some of these perceptions from an older person's experience we can help to dismiss some of the preconceived ideas and myths surrounding older age and help people prepare for a more positive experience.

In relation to the age range chosen for this study the countries that were included have a lower than many average age life expectancy of developed countries. With the overall global average life expectancy age of females at 79 years and males at 75 years of age¹⁴ all three countries still have a lower life expectancy of 77 years in Peru , 71 years in Indonesia and 61 years in Tanzania¹⁴. The country with the lowest life expectancy being Tanzania with an average life expectancy of 59 for males and the highest in Peru for females at 79 years.

Another factor to take into consideration for this age group is the health and functional status of older people which, although is improving in many countries², currently stands at 61 for males and 64 for females in Indonesia, 66 for males and 68 for females in Peru and 51 for males and 53 for females in Tanzania. Interestingly the relative proportion of females to males is smaller in less developed countries to those in the developed countries which may be due to the female's lower social status, combined with a preference for male children which may also have a negative impact on female life expectancy⁹. As seen in this study all three countries have a four year difference rather than the average of 7 years difference in the developed countries⁹.

As many governments' agendas review their ageing population the social and economic impact, as never seen before, will result in many challenges that are unknown and unseen. These include areas such as Sub-Saharan Africa which is expected to experience the smallest increase in the older population in the next 30 years due mainly the HIV/AIDs epidemic⁹.

This subpopulation then, according to Barrett², represents some of the most vulnerable people in the world who need to be given a voice to highlight their personal perceptions and experiences of ageing.

Older people in Indonesia, Tanzania and Peru.

All three countries are classed as emerging and developing economies therefore referred to as 'developing countries' according to the World Bank¹⁵ and includes some of the most older vulnerable people in the world.

Indonesia, according to Arifin et al¹⁶, is the most populous country in the world and were the first to gather information from older people aged 60 and above. The older population, of 60 plus years of age, are also the fastest growing segment of the population within Indonesia. Arifin found there was a good self-related health status and functional ability, they participated within home-centred leisure activities and their economic security varies by sex.

Tanzania does not use the same common terms for ageing as other developing countries but views it in relation to declining biological process where 60 years of age is also seen as the beginning of old age and the majority of older people belong to the poorest and most vulnerable groups within the country. Their 60 years and older age group is estimated to triple between 2020 and 2050¹⁷.

Peru's population is also rising with an increase in their older population, which according to Nunez¹⁸, will, by 2025, be estimated to be 8.6% of the country's total population having an impact on the health care services and pensions for this age group.

Findings.

Flowing the initial coding of the data from all the questionnaires and interviews the following themes were found: positive aspects of ageing and concerns related to growing older within the different cultures.

Positive aspects of ageing

Demakakos et al⁷ in their study of English adults found that in general, ageing is viewed as a positive experience for the majority of older people. This positive perception and experience was also evidenced in this study when participants were asked to discuss positive aspects of ageing. However six respondents stated there was nothing to look forward to; of these, five of were from Tanzania and one from Indonesia.

Through the analysis of the data collected, the following themes were identified in relation to positive aspects of growing older. Firstly, people could spend more time with their family (n= 30) and secondly, time for hobbies with eighteen responses (see table 1). However, the majority of people in Lima, Peru identified hobbies as their most positive aspect (n =11) with respondents from Tanzania not including hobbies in their top five (see table 2). Seeing their children grow and develop was also an important aspect across all the countries. Work was split between those who were glad to give up work and others who wanted to continue with their own work, which also appeared in all countries but related more towards continuing work in Indonesia whereas in Lima, Peru it was to pursue their own form of work. The last top positive aspect included 'health' with six respondents identifying that that they were still in good health which was related by two respondents to their ability to still be able to work.

Other aspects identified included: saving money, building their own homes, having a partner looking after them, living within a community, not caring about other people's opinions and aspects that related to their faith.

Table 1 top five positive aspects of growing older

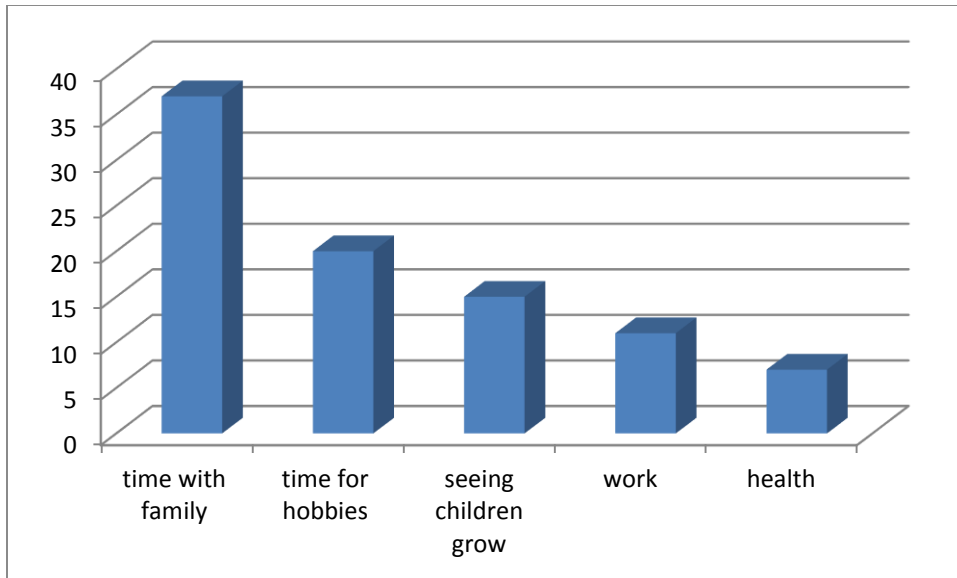
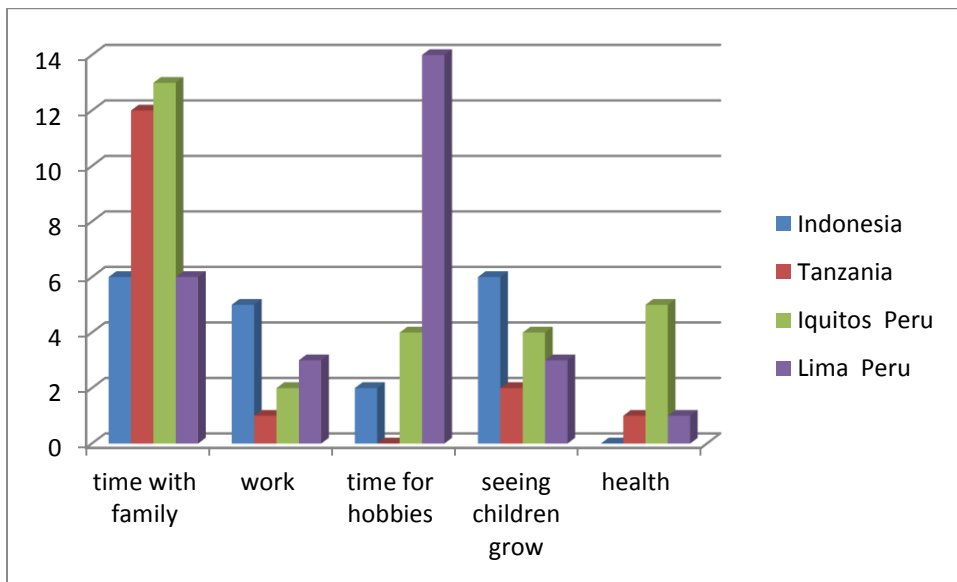


Table 2 : top five positive aspects of growing older relating to each country



Concerns about ageing

As noted earlier Demakakos et al⁷ found that for some ageing is not an unpleasant experience and suggests that this often contradicts the lay belief that the ageing is a process that leads to physical, mental, social and economic deterioration. They go onto note that the association of age with experience of ageing is not linear. Often they suggest that the experience depends on the

person's age as to their concerns and experiences at that time. Donorfio and Chapman¹⁹ also highlighted that some of the attitudes to ageing has changed over the years and that today's old person is more vibrant, confident, and able to remain more active and still contribute to society. In this study, to identify these changing attitudes the participants were also asked to identify any concerns they had in relation to ageing. The highest comments related to their health and fear of deterioration (see table 3), this is in line with Donorfio and Chapman¹⁹ and Demakakos et al⁷ who also suggest that the main fears are associated with dealing with limitations in relation to physical or mental health. Bowling's²⁰ study also found that having and maintaining health was the most common concern for older people and Demakakos et al⁷ found that two thirds of older people worry that their health will worsen. This was in the highest for all three of the countries and was noted as the top concern top for Tanzania and Lima, Peru but came a close second for Indonesia (see table 4) who identified death and dying as their top concern and Iquitos, Peru who identified living alone as their top concern. Loneliness, being a burden, loss of independence and death and dying were the other main concerns for this study (see table 4).

Table 3, Top five concerns of growing older

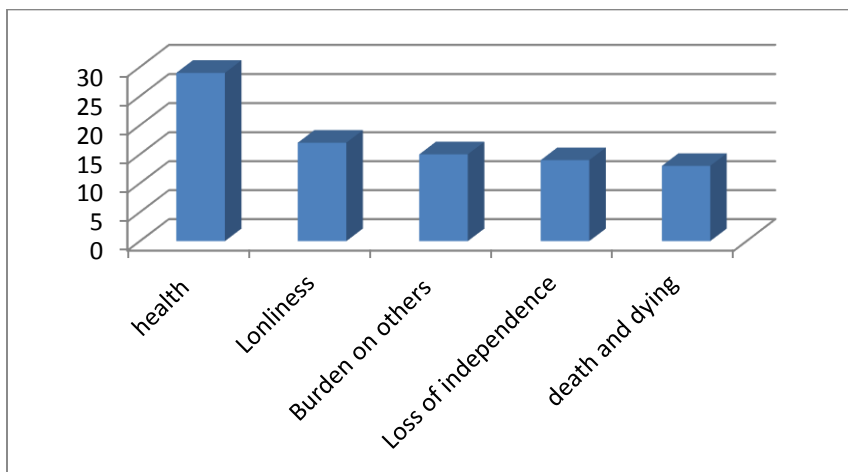
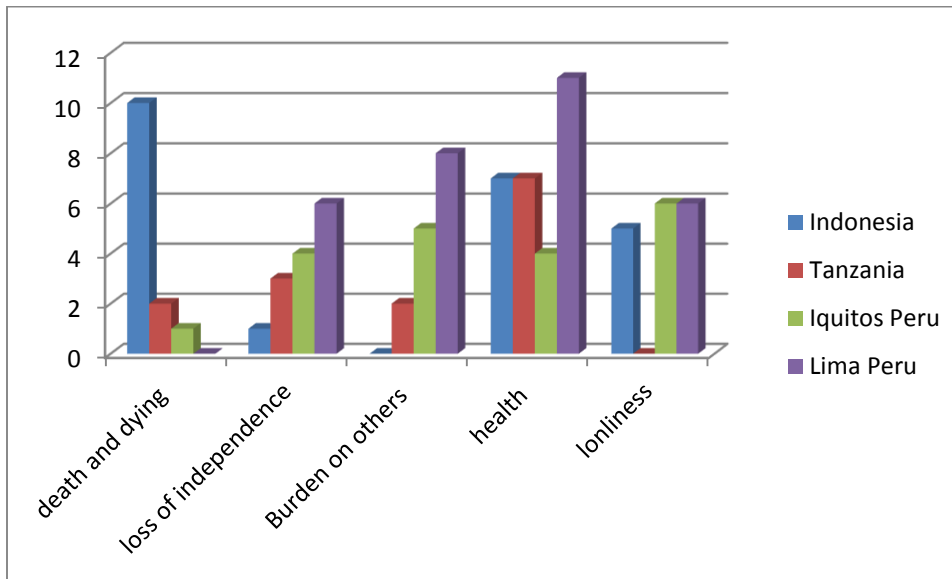


Table 4: top five concerns in relation to growing older in each country



Conclusions.

The ageing population is a reality across the globe and understanding ageing and explaining ageing is still difficult²¹. Fee et al²¹ also points out that often older people are seen as a homogenous group which does not take into consideration geographical location which can affect life and work experiences which in turn can affect health and behaviours and attitudes. This was evidenced in some of the findings of this study.

For the three developing countries included within this study the main positive aspects of ageing identified included: being able to spend time with their families, time for their hobbies or personal time, seeing their children, being able to work and health. Their concerns related to health concerns, becoming lonely, being a burden on others, loss of independence and the fear of death and dying.

The top positive aspects identified by the participants in the study were fairly constant across the countries with the exception of Tanzania where five did not have anything that they felt was positive about ageing and one in Indonesia expressed the same concern.

Limitations

This study only reviewed older people from three developing countries. As noted with the Peruvian cohorts there can also be a great diversity in the perceptions depending on location within the same country and therefore it is difficult to generalise these results across the globe or, at times, within the same country. Each country has its own unique culture and societies with their own attitudes towards their ageing population and even within each country these are different depending on the individual's personal health, social and economic situation. All these aspects will affect the older person's perceptions of growing older.

This paper is a report of the preliminary finding of the study and further in-depth analysis is required to identify the possible differences between the perceptions of growing order within the three countries.

Acknowledgements

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