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A qualitative research on role of social interaction and social network to prevent loneliness among elderly

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ABSTRACT

The present study was to explore the loneliness of the older adults and the role of social interaction and social networking (online) to reduce loneliness among elderly. As the study dealt with human emotions and feelings, qualitative approach was used. Data was collected through semi structured interviews with open and close ended questions. The empirical research material was collected by interviewing of 38 elderly people (both men and women) who lived at home with family and in old age home. Data was analyzed by method of content analysis. The results of present study showed that loneliness was perceived as both positive and negative feeling. But majority of the older adults did not feel loneliness living in residential area as well as living in old age home. But in comparison people of old age home felt loneliness. The findings of this study show the importance of social interaction for elderly people living in residential area as well as living in old age home. The result will contribute further research on loneliness and elderly people.

Key words: loneliness, elderly, old age, social interaction, old age home

1) INTRODUCTION

Old age is the last stage of life and known as closing period of lifespan. There are lots of changes at this stage in terms of physical and mental health. Old age requires developing some coping skills to adjust with these changes because life is not as easy as it was at younger age. The chances of illness increases in old age in comparison of other age group, old population need extra care (Smith et al. 2000). Elderly people face many problems as they age example loss of spouse, disease, social isolation, loneliness, depression etc. Among these problems loneliness is one of the major problems related with old age. Whenever we talk about loneliness it is mostly connected with elderly. It may be possible that some feels loneliness at younger age but that is not a very general phenomenon and perhaps no other age group feels the keen sting of loneliness more than the elderly. In fact loneliness is a serious problem for this age group. A survey has identified the role of family, friends and social interaction to reduce loneliness and enhance quality of life among seniors (Bowling, 1995). One research has shown that staying socially active and making social interaction gives older adults many benefits and helps them in successful aging (Rowe and Kahn, 1997).

1.1 Old age and happiness: Some studies show that elderly may be more prone to loneliness and this leads to unhappiness and increases the risk of mental and physical illness. However research found that happiness has modest relationship with age (Stone et al. 2010). Loneliness leads to unhappiness in elderly. A study examined that happiness can be different for different older people. For example happiness is likely

associated with a feeling of peacefulness for one older adult and kindness for another (Seligman and Steen, 2005). Social roles produce more happiness and if social network decreases like: friends or peers that makes the elderly people unhappy. Some studies found that happiness increases with friends and neighbors more than spouse in old age (Fowler and Christakis, 2008). Loneliness is more common among the elderly people that lose the will to live and happiness and the result is decreasing their mental well being (Fees et al. 1999; Tjihuis et al. 1999). So in this research loneliness has been taken in the perspective of elderly and also considers how social interaction and social network (online) plays important role to prevent loneliness.

1.2 Loneliness: Loneliness is common at every age but it increases in old age. People in old age mostly complain about loneliness. Research studies showed that loneliness are registered among midlife and older adults (Marcoen et al. 1987; Sippola and Bukowski, 1999). As loneliness has seen in every age group but it is strongly related with old age. Today old age loneliness is a popular topic of many discussions among researchers. Loneliness has been defined as “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively” (Perlman and Peplau, 1981).

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Loneliness is defined as an emotional state when person feels rejected by others and does not find any one for desired activity that provide a sense of social integration, and opportunities for emotional intimacy. While loneliness may be transient experience, for some it may be chronic state (Rook, 1984).

1.3 Types of loneliness: There are two types of loneliness:

- Emotional loneliness
- Social loneliness

1.3.1 Emotional loneliness– Emotional loneliness is associated with close and intimate attachment figure for e.g. death of spouse or lack of love which can be fulfilled by some loved one. Emotional loneliness is very subjective feeling which can be described only by the person itself (Anderson, 1998). Emotional loneliness is related to the absence of a partner or spouse that plays very important role in life (Holmen et al. 2000).

1.3.2 Social loneliness- Social loneliness is explained as a situation where a person does not have a social network or he is not satisfied with the present social network or social connection (Weiss, 1973).

Old age loneliness has always been under researched. At the same time preventions of loneliness has always been the part of interest in research. Lots of social network and more social interaction can be the strongest support against loneliness (Holmen and Furukawa, 2002). This study sheds light on the fact that it is actually dangerous to be extremely lonely in old age because the chances of early death increases if elderly feel profound loneliness in their lives. Profound loneliness may serious effect on health of older people. But there are ways to overcome loneliness in old age. Quality of social network or social interaction has great impact to reduce loneliness.

1.4 Social interaction: Social interaction has great role in old age. It was examined that positive interaction with people has strong impact on lives of older adults (Rook, 2001). Peers relationships are always important at every age but it is very important for older people. Research has shown that social relationship or social interactions are important elements within senior citizen care settings that protect them from illness and loneliness (Powers, 1998).

1.4.1 Older adults and the importance of social interaction-

Social interaction or social activities plays important role for elderly because if the person is busy in any social activities after retirement it helps them to overcome from loneliness because mostly there mind engaged in different work and they keep themselves busy in different type of activities. At this stage they may have lost many friends and are finding it hard to make new friends they may feel isolated. Studies has examined that healthy relations family or friend support give great deal of emotional support to elderly and promote healthy aging (Katherine et al. 2006). Healthy aging demands staying socially active and maintain a healthy relationship with others. In old age social connection seems less as it was in younger age but it is important in advanced age as it prevents aging with anxiety, depression or mental

Psychological and physical well being is an important issue for elderly person and it has accepted that social interaction and social activities or positive social life styles can increase the overall wellbeing of elderly. In one study most of the elderly reported that they felt positive attitude toward life and

self acceptance as their social involvement increased (Reichstadt et al. 2010).

1.5 Social networking (online): Social network have a beneficial effect on our way of life. These networking sites give us more ways to make social connection as these sites, just allow us to communicate with others and express ourselves easier. It was reported that social networking sites have become popular and have various influence on aspects of the society (Lampe, 2008).

1.5.1 Social networking sites (online) and elderly- It is assumed that social networking sites are especially popular among 18 to 25 it means youths use it more these sites and especially used by college student than adult or seniors. Prior research gave less emphasis on how elderly can use online social network to support social connection. A finding of study revealed that “largest growth in users in the six months ending July 2009 has been from the over 55 age group with a growth of 514 percent” (Owyang, 2009). This study showed that elderly also take interest in social networking sites, and want to themselves involve into it. A study reported that the older adults are trying to understand all networking sites and taking interest to get involve into it (Lehtinen et al. 2009).

Elderly want to learn this technology especially when it is the matter of grandchildren they can connect easily with their children or grandchildren. And another and important reason is that whenever they see using computers or any sites they become motivated to learn. Social Networking Sites are very useful for elderly they can communication and to be remain in contact with friends, relatives even with them who are very far from them. Also it helps to share feelings of each other which is very difficult to do with face to face. These sites are becoming popular among those elderly who do not want to adopt modernity. Elderly people who are very traditional and do not want to change sometimes they try to learn new technology if they understand that they are fit and easy enough to use (Gilly and Zeithaml, 1985).

Studies showed that retired seniors are seeing using social networking as more interesting and entertaining activity because with the help of this medium they can connect with their loved one very easily and getting involved with social networking sites they are feeling themselves active in their life. Past research suggest that most seniors are happy to learn networking sites like web tools because they appreciate this medium to stay connected with the outside world (Temple and Gavillet, 1990). Result of studies indicated that there are lots of hurdles that elderly people face daily, one is that of loneliness. A study reported that in old age when people retired from his job and find themselves weak at that time they find themselves easy to connect with social networking sites to do communication with loved ones and to increase their social interaction also to reduce loneliness (Fiori et al. 2007). A study found that if elderly people show their positive attitude towards social networking sites or technology they also like to use technical equipments (Eisma et al. 2004).

It is true that physical contact gives elderly psychological support and the fact cannot be denied that they can share their feeling more if they are talking face to face with each other but there are lots of situations where they cannot go outside because of illness or physical weakness then online networking gives them an emotional support to talk with the kids, friends or relatives and they feel less lonely. Now a day's

some new opportunities have evolved that can help to reduce loneliness in elderly.

Objectives:

- To explore how elderly people themselves experience loneliness.
- To know the importance of social interaction among elderly.
- To know the importance of social networking (online) among elderly.
- To see the gender differences in using social networking (online) and in social interaction.

To explore the loneliness of elderly people (male and female) living in old age home.

2) MATERIALS AND METHODS

Qualitative research is used for gaining knowledge attitudes, behaviour concern and life styles. Human emotions and behaviour could be explained with the help of qualitative research (Holloway and Wheeler, 2002; Burns and Grove, 2005). With the help of qualitative research we can know what people think, do and say. Qualitative research deals with that phenomena which are difficult to quantify like-believes, attitudes, views etc. Burns and Grove (2005) explain that qualitative research allows researchers to examine specific phenomenon more entirely and deeply. In the present study qualitative review method has been chosen because on the basis of the collection and analysis process, consequently, related knowledge was shown directly from previous researches and also qualitative research allows us to explore elderly people’s feeling and emotions in its best way.

2.1 Sample: Purposive sample, with altogether 38 elderly persons (13 females & 25 males) from IIT Delhi campus, Jia Sarai village Delhi, Gurgaon & old age home Delhi (Rana senior citizen home and Harmit Trust and home for seniors) were interviewed in this study. All the interviewees (elderly people) were Hindi and English spoken. Only those elderly male and female were chosen who was over 60 and showed interest in interview. Interviews were conducted at garden of IIT campus, at seniors home, Jia Sarai village and at old age home Delhi. The age of participant ranged from 60-85 years. Some interviews were audio taped and some were videotaped. There were some elder persons (including male and female) were not ready to give their views and ideas in audio so there interviews were taken handwritten. Interview was varied from 10 to 20 minutes.

2.2 Data collection: Interviews are the best tool for data collection in qualitative research. There are different types of interviews like structured, semi-structured and unstructured. Semi structured interview was chosen for this present study as it is also called a focused interview, a guide is formed to cover research topic. For verbal communication with elderly people first some open ended and close ended questions were created to conduct the interviews. For this purpose research questions were prepared and then questions were divided into three sections questions about loneliness, social interaction & social networking (online).

2.3 Data analysis: After collection of data, analysis has been done. There were followed three steps in data analysis-

1. Firstly, interviews are transcribed verbatim and field notes are organized.
2. Then, the transcripts and the written notes are read repeatedly.
3. The final stage of data analysis is coding and categorizing.

3) RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Questions were asked to the participant about loneliness, social interaction and social networking (online). Different responses were given by the participant it is shown below-

Questions and their responses from elderly males and females (total 38 participants)

Q1. Do you feel loneliness? Yes/No

Response: Total 81% elderly stated not to feel lonely and 19% elderly said they felt loneliness. It was also noticed that the elderly who were living in old age home they complained a little bit about loneliness but the total responses were less that showed negative attitude towards loneliness. Diagram given below shows the overall responses of elderly towards loneliness.

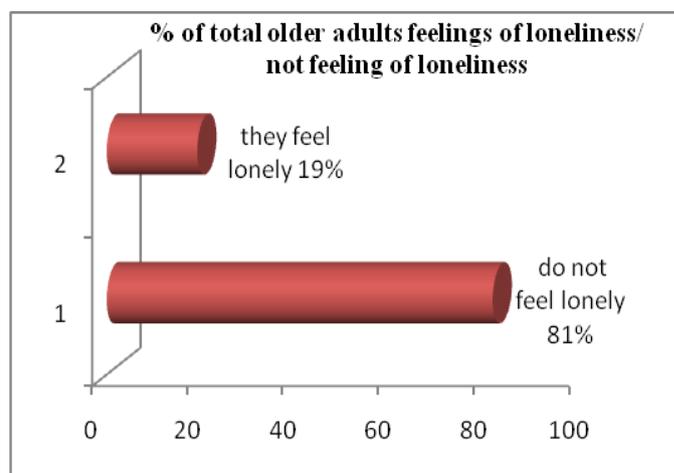


Figure 1- feeling of loneliness among elderly

Q2. Do you live with children or without children? With/Without

Response: Out of thirty three participants 24 (72%) elderly people were living with children and 9 (28%) elderly people were living without children. This question did not put up with three elderly males who belonged from old age home. Most of the elderly females also responded that they live with children the number of females were less, whose children were living in some other city/abroad because of job.

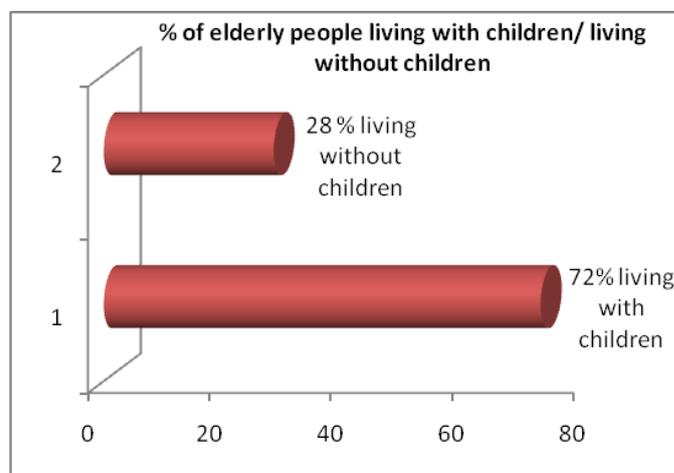


Figure 2- elderly living with children or without children

Q3. How long you feel lonely after your children lives in another city/abroad?

Response: Most of the participants responded in positive way that they did not feel lonely as their children live in another city or in abroad, but few said that they felt lonely while living without children. Out of 38 participants four (79%) elderly said there was no feeling of loneliness after their children had gone to another city or abroad. These four elderly males were belonged to residential area. Thirty (21%) elderly males said there was feeling of loneliness after their children had gone to another city or abroad.

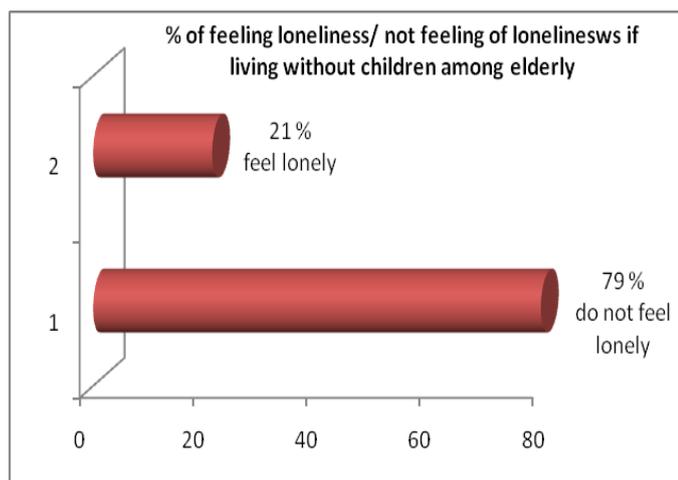


Figure 3- feeling of loneliness or not feeling of loneliness without children

Q4. Are you happy? Yes/ No. If yes, what is the meaning of happiness for you?

Response: The responses which were given by most of the participants were positive. Total 78% older adults responded positively towards happiness. Only 22% participants showed negative attitudes towards happiness. These participants belonged from both residential group as well as old age home. Diagram given below shows the overall responses of elderly towards happiness.

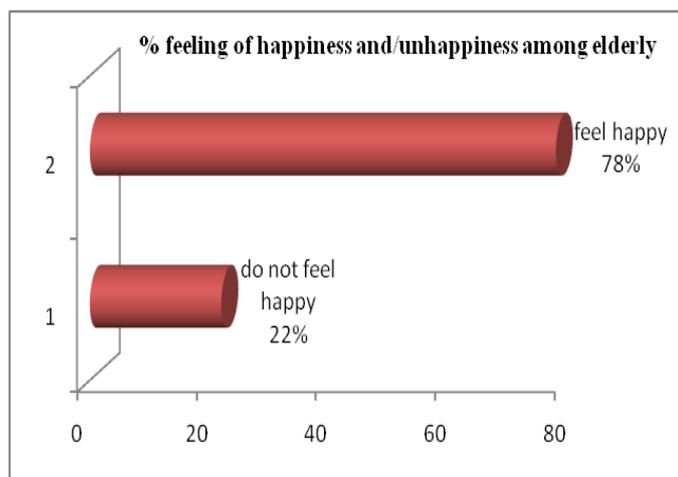


Figure 4- feeling of happiness/unhappiness among elderly

Question continued meaning of happiness.....

Response: When asked about the meaning of happiness different responses were noted from elderly males and

females. participants living in residential area had their own reasons for happiness but ‘children’s happiness’ were told the appropriate meaning of happiness and that was the most popular responses from both groups and meaning of happiness for elderly males and females living in old age home was ‘togetherness or companionship’. The responses are shown in table-1.

Q5. Do you have network of friends? Yes/ No. If yes do you like to interact them?

Response: Out of 38 participants 89% elderly had network of friends and 11% had responded with less or no friends.

MEANING OF HAPPINESS FOR ELDERLY MALES (Total 22)	
20(89%) Residential Area	2(11%) Old Age Home
85%-children’s happiness 5%-positive attitude 5%- if everything is good 5%-happiness is within our heart	50%- companionship 50%-uncertain
MEANING OF HAPPINESS FOR ELDERLY FEMALES (Total 8)	
87% Residential Area	1(13%) Old Age Home
62%- children’s happiness 25%- life should be good+ should be no problem in life	13%-togetherness

Table 1- Data shows participants’ responses in terms of percentages

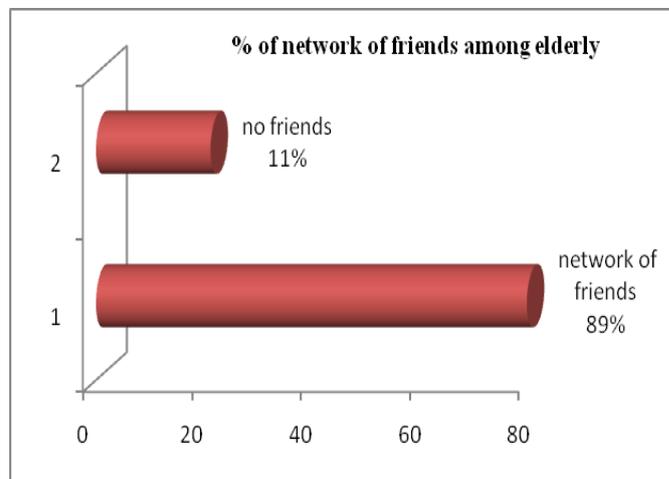


Figure 5- network of friends among elderly

Every participant was positive about both questions. Twenty three participants answered ‘yes’ to this question. Out of twenty three participants twenty two belonged to residential area and one belonged to old age home. and two participants answered ‘no’ to this question and they belonged from old age home. Every female participant was also positive about both questions .Eleven participants answered ‘yes’ to this question and belonged from residential area. Two participants answered ‘no’ to this question and they belonged from old age home they responded negatively to this question as they did not have any friend like whom they could talk with intimacy.

Question continued, Do you.....interact them?

The second sort of question was asked how they liked to interact with their friends from males as well as from females. Responses are given below.

Response- Both participants responded (were living in residential and were living in old age home) ‘yes’. Two elderly males (who were living in old age home) didn’t have network of friends, but they wanted to meet people. So they also responded in positive way to this question. Among 13 elderly females eleven said they like meeting with people and out of eleven females nine belonged from residential area and two belonged from old age home, and two elderly females who belonged from residential area answered a little bit negatively about this question.

Q6. Do you use social networking (online)? Yes /No. If no why?

Response: Most of the elderly did not use social networking site/online. Among 38 participants (74%) did not use social networking site only (26%) participants used social networking sites. The diagram given below shows the percentage of total users and non users of social networking sites-

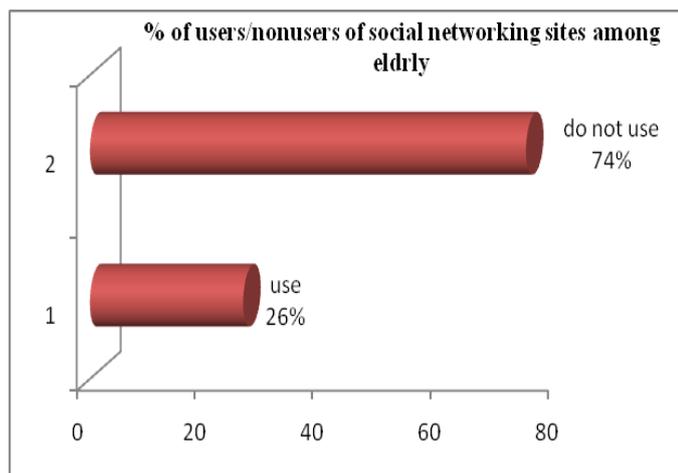


Figure 6 uses of social networking sites among elderly

Question continued.....If no why?

Response: Different causes that were told by elderly males and females for not using social networking sites All the participants who used social networking sites and lived in residential area they responded they were not in regular practice using computers but sometime they used just for general knowledge. But older adults who lived in old age home did not use social networking online. It was found during interview that they were not very much aware about this technology. There was only one female who used computer at home and belonged to residential area.

Q7. For what purpose do you use social networking (sites)?

Response- Nine elderly males were using social networking sites and were belonged from residential area. Those elderly males who were living in old age home they were not using social networking sites so responses had been taken only from those elderly males who were using these sites and they all belonged from residential area.

Purpose of using social networking sites (elderly males)	
(56%) participants responded	Gaining knowledge
(33%) participants responded	To talk with children
(11%) participants responded	Health purpose + gaining knowledge
Purpose of using social networking sites (elderly female)	
(8%) participant responded	I want to learn + we should know

Table 2- Data shows purpose of using social networking sites among elderly

Only one elderly female was using social networking sites and was belonged from residential area. Others elderly females were not interested using networking online. Those elderly females who were living in old age home they were not using social networking sites so responses had been taken only from only one elderly female who was using these sites belonged from residential area. The responses are shown in **table-2**.

4) CONCLUSION

From the studies reviewed, the several conclusions can be drawn-

- Loneliness has not been found in most of the older adults.
- In general widowed women reported more loneliness than men.
- Lower feeling of loneliness noticed of the elderly men and women living in the families rather than older adults living in old age home.
- The older adults who live with friends and family have better social relations than that of the older adults of old age home.
- Role of social networking sites were not found among elderly men and women. It might be that elderly had no personal interest and experiences in this field.

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