

"Loneliness behind Togetherness: Exploring Elderly Perceptions of Emotional and Social Support from Family and Friends"

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ABSTRACT

In the context of increasing global longevity, understanding the emotional and social dimensions of ageing has become vital. This study investigates the paradox of perceived loneliness among elderly individuals despite being surrounded by family and friends—a phenomenon we term “loneliness behind togetherness.” Using a multidisciplinary approach that incorporates sociological and psychological perspectives, the paper explores how older adults perceive the quality of emotional and social support they receive from close relationships. Findings reveal that while many elderly individuals live in proximity to loved ones, they often experience emotional distance, diminished interaction, or lack of meaningful engagement. Factors such as changing family dynamics, reduced mobility, health limitations, and internalized ageism contribute to this hidden loneliness. The study underscores the importance of intentional communication, emotional validation, and inclusive familial roles to promote well-being in later life. Recommendations are offered for policymakers and caregivers to foster environments that prioritize emotional connectivity alongside physical presence.

Keywords: *Elderly perception, emotional support, social isolation, ageing, family relationships, friendship, loneliness, intergenerational connection.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The global ageing population is growing at an unprecedented rate, with a significant increase in the number of individuals living into their 70s, 80s, and beyond. As people live longer, the focus of ageing research is expanding beyond medical and physical health to include emotional and social well-being. Among these concerns, the quality of social relationships and perceptions of emotional support from family and friends have emerged as critical factors influencing the quality of life in later years.

Despite living in close proximity to family members or maintaining contact with friends, many older adults report feelings of emotional disconnection and loneliness. This phenomenon—where physical presence does not guarantee emotional closeness—is often referred to as “loneliness behind togetherness.” As ageing brings with it changes in physical ability, cognitive function, and societal roles, older individuals may struggle with feelings of invisibility, irrelevance, or being emotionally neglected, even when surrounded by loved ones.

Recent observations suggest that social isolation and emotional loneliness are increasingly common among the elderly. Factors such as the loss of a spouse, reduced mobility, retirement, intergenerational gaps in communication, and the shift from joint to nuclear family systems have contributed to a decline in meaningful social engagement. At the same time, many elderly individuals express a strong desire for recognition, companionship, and the opportunity to remain emotionally connected to their families and communities.

This study aims to explore how older adults perceive their emotional and social engagement with family members and friends. It seeks to understand whether they feel heard, valued, and included in interpersonal relationships, and how their social interactions—or lack thereof—impact their emotional well-being. By focusing on the subjective experiences of the elderly, the study hopes to contribute to the broader discourse on healthy ageing and to inform the development of more responsive and inclusive care systems for the ageing population.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The global increase in life expectancy has drawn significant scholarly attention toward the social and emotional well-being of older adults. Social engagement, particularly with family and friends, has emerged as a key determinant of quality of life in later years. Several studies emphasize that although elderly individuals may reside with or near family, their subjective experiences often reveal emotional detachment, lack of meaningful interaction, or a sense of marginalization (Schoenmakers et al., 2015).

Recent research underscores the importance of diverse and emotionally fulfilling relationships for successful ageing. Studies have shown that networks of friends contribute more positively to well-being than family networks alone, particularly due to the voluntary and emotionally reciprocal nature of friendships (Antonucci et al., 2017). The coexistence of family and friendship ties has also been shown to enhance resilience against loneliness and depression (Park et al., 2022).

A South Korean study by Lee and Lee (2023) tested a conceptual model that linked perceived social support and physical activity to improved quality of life among older adults. Their findings demonstrated that loneliness and low emotional support were significantly associated with decreased physical health and psychological well-being. Similarly, in a longitudinal cohort study in Southern Europe, older adults with strong social relationships were found to have lower mortality rates, affirming the protective effects of emotional connectedness (Pavlidis et al., 2021).

In the Indian context, the impact of shrinking joint family systems and increasing migration has been identified as a major contributor to emotional isolation among the elderly. A study in rural Uttar Pradesh by Prakash and Singh (2020) revealed that elderly individuals with stronger social networks—including both kin and non-kin—reported higher life satisfaction and self-esteem. A comparative study conducted in Jammu between elderly individuals in old age homes and those in family setups found that those living with families experienced greater emotional support and higher sociability (Kaur, 2019).

Furthermore, Help Age India (2025) highlighted that while digital platforms enable elderly persons to stay in contact with distant family and friends, digital illiteracy and lack of emotional engagement in these interactions often perpetuate a sense of loneliness. This aligns with findings from a global meta-analysis which reported that nearly 26% of older adults experience chronic loneliness, despite regular social contact (Dykstra et al., 2024).

Notably, family involvement has been found to play a critical role in the psychosocial health of elderly individuals in institutional settings. A qualitative study from Macau revealed that perceived emotional support from family members was associated with enhanced life satisfaction, sense of dignity, and emotional stability among elderly residents (Chan et al., 2020).

Additionally, cultural contexts significantly influence how elderly individuals perceive support. A cross-cultural comparison by Lin and Pei (2018) found that Chinese elderly were more emotionally affected by family support, while American elderly derived greater psychological benefits from friendships. This suggests that socio-cultural norms and expectations shape both the availability and impact of social engagement in old age.

Recent studies also point toward structural and policy-level barriers that hinder elderly participation in meaningful relationships. In Singapore, ethnographic research highlighted how older adults often prioritize family responsibilities over personal social participation due to cultural expectations, despite feeling socially marginalized (Tan et al., 2022). These findings call for age-friendly policies that address individual preferences and promote inclusive family dynamics.

Taken together, these studies suggest that social presence alone does not ensure emotional fulfilment for elderly individuals. The quality, consistency, and reciprocity of relationships—particularly within the family and friendship spheres—are central to perceived social engagement and well-being in later life. Therefore, exploring the *perceptions* of elderly individuals becomes critical in designing interventions that are emotionally resonant, culturally sensitive, and psychosocially effective.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Title of the Study

"Loneliness behind Togetherness: A Study on Perception of Elderly about Their Social Engagement with Family and Friends"

Subtitle

"An Exploratory Study of 29 Elderly Individuals in Vadodara City, Gujarat"

Research Design

This study employs a descriptive research design, which is appropriate for exploring and analysing the perceptions of elderly individuals regarding their social interactions and emotional engagement with family members and friends. The design facilitates the identification of patterns in behaviour, attitudes, and challenges faced by the elderly, allowing for insights into their lived experiences. The study integrates both quantitative and qualitative elements, with a semi-structured interview

schedule used for primary data collection.

Significance of the Study

Social engagement plays a pivotal role in the mental, emotional, and physical well-being of elderly individuals. As people age, close relationships with family and friends contribute not only to enhanced quality of life but also to better health outcomes. Research has shown that seniors with frequent social interactions experience slower cognitive decline, reduced stress, lower risks of depression, and better physical health. Socialization is also associated with increased longevity, particularly when combined with activities such as group exercises and meaningful community involvement. This study aims to highlight the routine interactions, emotional needs, and subjective perceptions of elderly individuals regarding their relationships, ultimately helping to inform community and policy-level interventions.

4. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Main Objective

To raise awareness in society about the social and emotional needs of elderly individuals.

Sub-Objectives

To promote a healthy and fulfilling life for elderly individuals.

To encourage family and friends to maintain positive relationships with the elderly.

To advocate for better social and health services for senior citizens.

To evaluate the quality of interaction and care received by elderly persons from family and peers.

Universe of the Study

The universe for this research comprises elderly individuals residing within the geographical boundaries of Vadodara city, Gujarat, India.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study adopts a simple random sampling method to ensure representativeness and reduce selection bias. A total of 29 elderly respondents were selected from various wards and neighbourhoods of Vadodara city. The inclusion criteria consisted of individuals aged 60 years and above who were capable of responding to the interview schedule.

Variables of the Study

Independent Variables: Demographic characteristics such as age, gender, caste, religion, education level, and living arrangement.

Dependent Variables: Emotional perception of social engagement, frequency and quality of interactions with family and friends, feelings of loneliness or connectedness, and perceived support.

Tools of Data Collection

Primary Data: Collected through a structured interview schedule tailored to capture the subjective experiences and social realities of elderly individuals.

Secondary Data: Sourced from books, scholarly articles, government reports, prior dissertations, websites, and academic journals relevant to gerontology and social psychology.

Key Findings

The study, conducted among 29 elderly individuals residing in Vadodara city, offers insights into their demographic profile and perceptions of social engagement with family and friends. The majority of the respondents (44%) belonged to the age group of 60 to 70 years, and over half of them (54%) were female. A significant portion of the elderly participants (40%) indicated that their sons were the primary caregivers in their households. Educationally, most of the respondents (47%) had completed up to primary education, and notably, none of the respondents were illiterate. Regarding occupational background, 45% of the respondents had served in government jobs, and nearly half (48%) continued to engage in other forms of work during their later years.

Marital and family-related findings revealed that 66% of the participants were married, and 67% reported having no son or only one son. Additionally, 69% had two to four daughters. Family structure appeared to be robust, with 64% of respondents living in households with more than four members, and 77% residing in joint family systems. Despite the presence of family members, 35% of the elderly stated that they were financially dependent on their sons. Health-wise, half of the respondents reported not having any diagnosed disease, and 40% did not spend any money on healthcare. A majority (71%) identified themselves as completely independent in their daily lives, while 72% could perform at least some activities on their own.

In terms of interaction with family members, 50% of the respondents met with one relative per month, while 30% had interactions with relatives less than once a month. Though 45% reported being able to freely communicate with at least one relative, and 47% had someone they could call for help, a concerning 31% felt that relatives never discussed important decisions with them. An equal percentage noted that their relatives were never available to talk before making such decisions, highlighting a gap in emotional involvement and mutual consultation within the family.

When it came to friendships and neighbourhood interactions, half of the respondents stated that they met two friends or neighbours in a month, and 44% interacted with them multiple times per month. About 34% of the elderly had two friends or neighbours they could rely on during times of need. However, 38% felt that their friends or neighbours were only sometimes available for important discussions. These findings reflect a complex social reality in which elderly individuals may appear to be socially surrounded, yet often experience a lack of emotional closeness, shared decision-making, and dependable support.

Suggestions and Possible Social Work Interventions

Based on the findings of the present study, it is evident that while many elderly individuals live within family structures and maintain some form of social contact, emotional isolation, limited participation in decision-making, and lack of consistent interaction with relatives and peers remain persistent issues. To enhance the psychosocial well-being of elderly individuals, the following suggestions and social work interventions are proposed:

Strengthening Intergenerational Communication

There is a need to foster improved communication between the elderly and younger family members. Social workers can facilitate **intergenerational dialogue workshops** and family counselling sessions to address communication gaps, promote empathy, and encourage inclusive decision-making within families. Emphasizing the emotional needs of the elderly during these interactions can reinforce their role as valued members of the household.

Promoting Community-Based Elder Support Groups

Establishing **community elder support groups or senior clubs** can provide elderly individuals with a platform to share experiences, socialize, and form meaningful friendships. Such groups can be organized through community centres, local NGOs, or religious institutions. These gatherings not only reduce isolation but also create informal networks of support.

Home Visit and Outreach Programs

Many elderly individuals may not actively seek support due to health, emotional hesitations, or fear of being a burden. Trained social workers and volunteers should conduct **regular home visits** to identify those at risk of isolation or neglect. Through structured outreach programs, social workers can assess individual needs and connect elders with appropriate services or support systems.

Capacity-Building for Digital Literacy

Given the increasing importance of digital communication, especially for connecting with distant family members, targeted **digital literacy programs** for older adults should be implemented. Teaching elders how to use smartphones, video calls, and social media platforms can significantly improve their emotional connectivity and sense of inclusion.

Psycho-Social Support Services

Some respondents expressed a lack of emotional support or felt excluded from family decisions. Introducing **psycho-social counselling services** tailored to older adults—either individually or in group therapy formats—can help them express feelings, build coping mechanisms, and reclaim a sense of autonomy.

Advocacy for Elder-Friendly Policies

Social workers must engage in policy-level advocacy to ensure the inclusion of elderly voices in planning urban infrastructure, healthcare delivery, and social schemes. Interventions should push for **age-friendly environments** with accessible public spaces, affordable healthcare, and mechanisms that ensure the social protection and dignity of older persons.

Volunteerism and Youth Engagement

Encouraging students and community youth to volunteer in elder care initiatives can bridge the generational divide. “**Adopt-a-Grandparent**” programs, storytelling circles, and shared activity sessions (like gardening, crafts, or cultural events) can enhance mutual respect and emotional fulfilment for both groups.

Training for Caregivers

In households where sons or daughters act as primary caregivers, **short-term training sessions** facilitated by social workers can provide insights into elder care, communication techniques, and emotional intelligence. This can improve caregiving quality and help prevent unintentional neglect or frustration.

Monitoring Emotional Decision-Making Involvement

Families and institutions must be sensitized to include elderly members in decisions affecting them—ranging from financial matters to personal care. Social workers can develop **decision-making inclusion toolkits** for families and care homes to ensure elderly individuals are consulted, heard, and respected.

Regular Well-Being Assessments

To detect early signs of isolation or psychological distress, **periodic assessments** should be institutionalized through senior citizen centres or community health workers. Early identification enables timely intervention and prevents long-term mental health consequences.

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