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## “I feel like I’m drawing strength from it”: Lived Experiences of Filipino Elderly Participating in Craft-Making

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## **“I feel like I’m drawing strength from it”: Lived Experiences of Filipino Elderly Participating in Craft-Making**

### **Abstract**

In this phenomenological study, we offer an insightful understanding of the lived experiences of seven (7) Filipino elderly participating in craft-making. We purposively selected the key informants from a municipality in the province of Bulacan, Philippines. The transcribed data gathered through a semi-structured in-depth interview was analyzed using Colaizzi’s approach. Six themes describing the lived experiences emerged: “Fostering friendship,” “Flourishing health,” “Furthering service,” “Facing aging with acceptance,” “Finding felicity and self-fulfillment,” “Feelings of belongingness and security.” Just like the sun, the elderly’s participation in craft-making serves as a nourishment for them. This exploration speaks to understanding the potential of craft-making as a leisure activity for elderly.

### **Keywords**

Elderly, Lived experiences, Craft-Making, Qualitative, Phenomenology

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## **“I feel like I’m drawing strength from it”: Lived Experiences of Filipino Elderly Participating in Craft-Making**

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The gradual growth of the elderly population necessitates the introduction of activities that may promote well being, like leisure activities (Menec, 2003). According to Bowling and Dieppe (2005), leisure activities are considered as part of successful aging. Such activities are known to promote socialization, either in a formal or informal group activities. It also reported that social participation among elderly can promote a positive health perception, which is influential in modifying attitude towards aging (Klein, Council, & McGuire, 2005). Undeniably, leisure activities are recognized as an essential component in maintaining elderly wellbeing (Avlund et al., 2004; Lampinen, Heikkinen, Kauppinen, & Heikkinen, 2006; McKenna, Broome, & Liddle, 2007).

Two theoretical underpinnings are mostly cited to explain elderly’s activity participation and wellbeing. Through the lens of Activity Theory, leisure activities may offer roles to elderly that may contribute to the development of their sense of self and identity (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972). Likewise, for the Theory of Selective Optimization with Adaptation, compensatory strategies are emphasized to keep the meaningful activities, especially when changes caused by aging becomes more evident (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Leisure activities may serve as a compensatory strategy that can allow elderly to focus on more important and meaningful activities.

Craft-making is one example of leisure activity – defined as an art or craft practices that aims to produce tangible artifacts of varying levels of difficulties (Reynolds & Lim, 2007). Several scholars have already turned their attention to art- and craft-making. Findings from previous qualitative studies suggest that art- and craft-related activities promote: creation and strengthening of relationship (Piercy & Cheek, 2004), enhancement of mood (Forssén, 2007), self-development (Dicke, 2003), improvement of self-identity (Dicke, 2003; Reynolds, 2009), and social participation (Bergland & Kirkevold, 2006). However, there is a dearth of studies that focuses on the craft-making experiences of Filipino elderly population. To our knowledge, the study of Liddle, Parkinson, and Sibbritt (2013) closely relates to this inquiry. Liddle et al. (2013) focused on the arts and craft-making activities among elderly women. Our study situates

the inclusion of both male and female informants and the phenomenological nature of our inquiry which seeks to provide an insight by uncovering the essential structures of experiences (Cohen & Omery, 1994).

Overall, craft-making among Filipino elderly seems a relatively less explored subject. Thus, we conducted this study to capture the lived experiences of Filipino elderly participating in craft-making, specifically their involvement in a social association outside the home.

### *Positionality*

Our research team at Our Lady of Fatima University is composed of nurse educators, researchers, and students, who have experienced conducting qualitative studies or are interested in qualitative methods. The group is headed by S. Cajayon and R. L. Macabasag. Our group met once a week then discussed and monitored the whole inquiry process. As members of the research group, we all signed a confidentiality agreement prior to reading and analyzing the transcripts. N. Limchanco and V. Umali served as team leaders during data collection. They led the students – E. Blas, M. S. Angulo, C. J. A. Breguera, N. A. A. de Guzman, S. N. Malapi, and E. E. Quibote – in facilitating face-to-face interviews. Each of the interviewers reviewed the transcripts and noted all significant statements that may reflect the focus of this inquiry. During our weekly roundtable discussion, the transcripts were read aloud and discussions were initiated when a significant statement was mentioned. All team members were encouraged to take notes and comments in the interview transcripts, which were later on returned to the group leaders.

S. Cajayon, R. L. Macabasag, N. Limchanco, and V. Umali are registered nurses with master's degree in Nursing. The majority of their practice are on teaching nursing and research. The four have experienced working with elderly patients in their clinical practice. In this study, we positioned ourselves in an interpretivist-relativist paradigm, considering the nature of the inquiry. At the time of study implementation, E. Blas, M. S. Angulo, C. J. A. Breguera, N. A. A. de Guzman, S. N. Malapi, and E. E. Quibote were still students in the College of Nursing. Similarly, they took an interpretivist-relativist paradigm in this inquiry.

## **Methods**

### *Qualitative Approach and Sample*

We followed Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological approach to describe the universal essences of the craft-making phenomenon among the elderly. According to Price (2003), a phenomenology is useful in framing care for the elderly, since the approach allows insightful understanding of their lived experiences. The description of the lived experiences is derived from the clustered formulated meanings highlighted in the verbatim interview transcripts (Shosha, 2012). Through phenomenology, we described craft-making among the elderly and underscored the characteristics of their lived experiences.

We used purposive sampling to select the key informants. Purposive or judgmental sampling is based on the assumption that the researchers' knowledge regarding the intended population can be used to determine the suitable participants (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). In this study, the inclusion criteria for participation are (a) Male or Female; (b) Filipino Citizen; (c) Aged 60 above; (d) Engaged in craft-making; (e) Active member of an elderly association; and (f) Willing to participate in this study. We excluded elders with physical disabilities (e.g. paralysis, blindness, inability to speak etc.) that can hinder social participation.

### *Ethical Considerations*

The ethical soundness of this inquiry was ascertained by the Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC) of Our Lady of Fatima University, Philippines – a research ethics review committee accredited by the Philippine Health Research Ethics Board (PHREB). The key informants signed an informed consent form and ensured of their confidentiality. All audio-recordings collected were used solely for research and deleted after the study was completed. The key informants were also informed that their study participation is entirely voluntary and they can withdraw their participation anytime. We minimized potential risks to the informants by providing first aid kits and free-of-charge emergency services from an on-call trauma nurse and counselling psychologist, in case of adverse physical and psychological reactions during data collection. All verbalizations presented in this inquiry were not alluded to any of the informants.

### *Data Collection and Procedure*

We conducted a face-to-face, in-depth, and semi-structured interview using an *aide memoir* to collect experiential materials from the key informants. Aide memoir is a list of potential interview questions that serves as prompts, reminding the interviewers of the key points to cover (Whitley & Crawford, 2005). We informed community officials – who served as gatekeepers – prior to approaching the participants personally. Upon the approval of the gatekeepers, we then recruited suitable key informants who are willing to participate in our study. The key informants who volunteered to join the inquiry chose a convenient venue for the interview.

We conducted the face-to-face interview in Filipino using the following interview prompts: (a) Please tell me about your experiences in participating to the craft-making activities of your elderly association; (b) Tell me what is it like to be an elder who has participated in craft-making activities; and (c) As an elder, share with me your what you felt when you participated in craft-making. To facilitate the emergence of eidetic description of their experiences, we encouraged the key informants to speak openly, prior and during the interview. Follow-up questions were raised if necessary to focus the conversation on the lived experiences of elderly in craft-making. Giorgi (1997) called this the “open approach” that includes – listening with genuine interest, providing adequate time for the participants to share their experiences; requesting for clarification; and phrasing the follow question based on how the participants presented the phenomenon. The audio-recorded conversation lasted for about 45 – 90 minutes.

We achieved data saturation after the fifth key informant, however, an additional two key informant interviews were conducted to ensure saturation. According to Mason (2010), data saturation occurs when the interviews no longer provide new codes or information.

### *Data Analysis*

We analyzed the transcribed interview following Colaizzi’s (1978) seven-step approach. First we (re)read all interview transcripts to capture the meaning of the lived experiences. As we (re)read the transcripts, we identified significant statements that seems to reflect the elders’ experiences in craft-making. Next, we formulated meanings from the identified significant statements, to provide readers an insight and illuminate hidden meanings of the pre-reflected experiences. We then clustered the formulated meanings to allow emergence of themes that are common to the key informants. These themes were integrated further to provide an exhaustive description of craft-making phenomenon among elders.

Finally, we asked the key informants to ascertain the study findings, if it actually reflect their lived experiences.

### *Scientific Rigor*

We followed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework namely – credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability – to ensure the scientific rigor of this qualitative study. Credibility confirms the phenomenon was correctly acknowledged and described. In this study, we conducted four activities to ascertain credibility: (1) the exhaustive description of the phenomenon; (2) the formulated meanings; (3) the iterative comparison of statements; and (4) audit trail. Dependability is the attempt of the researchers to account for consistency of the findings. In this study, interviews were conducted until data saturation occurred. According to Seidman (2006), data saturation is the point in which no new information appears to the interviewer, and that same information is repeated in different interviews. We achieved data saturation after the fifth key informant interview. An additional two interviews were conducted to ascertain saturation. No new significant statements emerged, hence data saturation was assumed.

Transferability demonstrates the application of the findings from this study to another context. Providing a thick description of the phenomenon was conducted to ensure transferability. In this study, the phenomenon was described through themes and a visual analogy supplemented to present anecdotes from the participants.

Finally, confirmability – a similar concept of objectivity in quantitative research designs – was achieved through the process of reduction. The reduction was done when we “bracketed” our presupposition about the study. It allowed us to see the phenomenon through the eyes of the informants. Reactions from each interview were carefully documented in a reflexive journal to identify and exclude potential biases. We analyzed the transcribed interview and our reflexive journals in a roundtable discussion to assure consensus and bias-free description and interpretation.

### **Findings**

In this inquiry, we identified six themes that described the lived experiences of Filipino elderly in craft making, namely: (a) fostering friendship, (b) flourishing health, (c) furthering service, (d) facing aging with acceptance, (e) finding felicity and self-fulfillment, and (g) feelings of belongingness and security. We treated each themes as “figures of meaning” which served as basis for structuring the phenomenological text.

The “sun as a nurturer” is a recurring image in this inquiry. It symbolizes power, health, growth, and life – the same way it provides nourishment and enlightenment to plants, animals, and humans. The sun was revered because of its capability to generate and sustain life. The mental model of this metaphor may evoke insight regarding elderly's lived experiences in craft-making. We invite the readers to view craft-making like a sun. In Figure 1, the sun's center represents the craft-making phenomenon, while the rays emitted symbolize the themes that emerged in this inquiry. Similar with the sun, craft-making may provide illumination or nourishment that can shape elderly's lived experiences.



**Figure 1.** The Six Rays of Lived Experiences of the Elderly Model

### *Fostering Friendship*

Withdrawal from previous roles and responsibilities can occur with aging. This withdrawal – as implied in the verbalization among elderly – can occur especially in those relations formed alongside their former roles in the society. Potentially, this can place the elderly at risk for social isolation. The experiences of elderly suggest how craft-making shaped their lifeworld. The following anecdotes provide insight as to how craft-making can foster friendship. One informant attested:

Oh, for me, it is important to mingle with my fellow senior citizen. As I told you, old people like me face many problems like stress... I think you should socialize and interact to prevent yourself from thinking too much.

As seen through the lens of the informants, fostering friendship refers to the strong bond formed among with the other association members in craft making. Their recollection showed that craft-making is seen as a form of activity that may facilitate creation of deeper relationships. Socializations can be formed by joining senior citizen organization. But, it is through craft-making – as a “sun” – that relationships are further deepened or nourished.

Their withdrawal from previous roles may also imply a reduction of their lifeworld. For instance, an elder who previously worked in a corporate industry may consider his or her lifeworld “extensive,” which involves engagement with diverse types of people. But upon retirement, their lifeworld may sometimes be reduced to the community they currently lived in, their family, and his or herself. The second informant revealed that he participates in the construction of an *arko* (wooden arch) as a way of getting along with the community people:

I’m fond of joining and socializing in peer groups especially because I am not originally from this area. The community people welcomed me and sent me invitations to join them make crafts, of course I would take it until we got along really well and every time we bumped into each other or we have finished a project, we would wrap it up with a drink.

Although the lifeworld of the elderly may have reduced, craft-making helped them form or strengthen bonds with the community. Craft-making may have provided them an opportunity to know more the neighboring people around them. In fact, another informant has recalled: “I feel good here (in this association). Since this is a good form of bonding... we get to joke around especially with those whom we are familiar with.”

Craft-making may have mediated the relations exemplified in the preceding anecdotes. Their relationship has deepened, to the point they get to talk humorously to their fellow elderly. Likewise, the friendship formed in craft-making may have helped the elderly provide constructive criticisms to others’ work:

We do not usually have misunderstandings. If someone does something unpleasant, we criticize each other by letting him know what we think while throwing him some friendly bumps...See? We would just make fun of it.

The first sunray as experienced by the informants suggests that craft-making can foster creation of friendship. In this regard, we may view craft-making as a form of socializing activity wherein deep relations can be formed. Despite withdrawal from previous roles and responsibilities, craft-making activities may foster creation of friendly relations, as exemplified by the elderly’s verbalizations.

### *Flourishing Health*

The elderly’s withdrawal from their previous roles may also be related to the physical changes that accompany aging. These physical changes may have limited them from participating in physical activities. But for the elderly, craft-making was seen as an opportunity to engage in health-promoting activities. One of the elderly responded that craft-making assisted her in sustaining her health: “Primarily, it’s because I do not feel anything wrong about my health. I can still walk well; my posture is still good and I don’t easily get cramped.”

The informant’s participation to craft-making have also changed his perception about his health. One informant has commented: “Until now I am still happy, I even thank God because, despite my age, I do not take health maintenance medications yet, I don’t feel bad about my health, that’s why I don’t feel sad.” One of the informants even believed that he gets strength in craft making: “I feel like I’m drawing my strength from it. That’s all.” The fourth informant reiterated that to maintain good health, one should remain physically active despite aging and retirement: “You need to work and sweat to be healthy. When you lock yourself at home and do nothing, you will lose your strength.”

The informants’ verbalization suggest that craft-making helped them in “flourishing their health.” Flourishing health pertains to the beneficial effects of craft-making and socialization as experienced by elderly. The elderly’s portrayal showed that craft-making may have shaped their view of their own health.

### *Furthering Service*

Furthering service shows how the elderly utilizes their skills in craft-making in serving their community. It also refers to their goal of imparting the art of craft-making to the younger generations as a way of serving and continuing craft-making. This theme brings into play the genuine desire of the elderly to function meaningfully by providing service even without remuneration.



During town fiestas, we help in building the *arko* for free but when someone asks us to do it on other occasions like weddings, if they have the budget, we get paid. Yes, I do it willingly. My child once asked me why do I keep on accepting invites, do I get compensated? My reason was – for me it feels good that I can still be of help to others. It feels good (serving others) every time. My child asked me what is the use of accepting interviews when I do not get compensated. I told him, they are just students trying to acquire knowledge from us. The good acts I do for my fellow, even if it means nothing to them – they may even call it a waste of time, it still means a lot to me.

The informant looked at craft-making as a cultural wealth that needs to be preserved and imparted to the next generation. He also emphasized that their crafts are the marks they can leave this world, that though their time will pass, craft-making will still remain: “I don’t want to just keep it to myself. It is meant to be shared. According to my ancestors, it is that one thing that will remain alive through the test of time.” Executing their skills in making crafts, particularly the *arko*, provide the elderly an opportunity to render service to their fellows and the entire community, especially during town fiestas.

### *Facing Aging with Acceptance*

During the interviews, the informants viewed aging with acceptance as they practice craft-making. In fact, one of the informant verbalized: “I didn’t avail any of the treatment options, since I am already old. Clear or blurry sight, I wouldn’t take it.” The responses are mostly focused on the physical changes brought about by aging.

Everyone tells me to eat more so I can gain weight. I would not gain weight anymore. I told them, ‘you know, your body gets worn out as you age’. We are not going anywhere but get old. When the time comes the Lord rebukes you, you are going to give this life back to him.

Aging is sometimes associated to the idea of nearing death. Some would say that this time in ones’ life is a “waiting period” before actual death. However, one of the informants emphasized that aging and death should not be feared, but be accepted instead.

You should not fear death. I am ready for that. I joined a group where I know someone... it’s called Mahar Senior Citizenship Plan. In that way, my relatives would not have to get stressed out buying me my casket.

When asked about his personal aging process, the fourth informant implied that aging comes with changes that should be embraced: “It is expected that people will get old, of course you must accept what was given to you.” For most of the informants, aging is a normal process that will happen to everyone and when the time comes, you can do nothing but face it.

Ahh, you mean changes. Of course, when you get old, your physical strength alters. That’s why you have to watch out your diet. Just accept what was given to you, if you worry so much about it, you would just get sad and even older. Hahaha.

The informants’ craft-making experiences may have provided them opportunity to look into themselves deeply as an aged individual. Facing aging with acceptance particularly

discusses the informants' awareness and recognition that aging and death are a normal phenomenon and something inevitable that should not be feared rather, accepted.

### *Finding Felicity and Self-fulfillment*

The key informants conveyed their desire to pass on the knowledge and skills in craft-making to others. One of the elderly described that sharing with others what they have learned and experienced in joining craft-making activities has shaped his experiences: "Oh, I am really happy because I am able to teach and help a lot of people since not everyone knows how to do this (craft-making)."

Another elderly described the knowledge and skills acquired in craft-making as a "legacy" that can be passed on to the next generations:

I still want to learn and do many things. In fact, I am really happy that more people acquire the skill – this (craft-making) is not something that fades when broken or misplaced, my grandfather told me that it is already existing even during the time of our ancestors. Hence, it should be passed from one generation to the next.

Another elderly conveyed that it pleases them to see their project finished:

As I said, when you help other people, it lightens up your burden. We build an *arko* when someone asks us to do it. Seeing the output made us really happy. We enjoy doing the *arko* as a group and work using our individual unique styles.

The key informants seemed to value craft-making. One of the elderly have even described it as something that does not fade away or something that cannot be broken. For them, sharing what they know about craft-making allowed them experience a sense of felicity and self-fulfillment. Finding felicity and self-fulfillment refer to the bliss, joy, and self-satisfaction the informants felt upon realizing a goal and sharing it to others.

### *Feelings of Belongingness and Security*

Feelings of belongingness and security pertain to the participants' confidence and familiarity with the people they share crafting with. It speak of the assurance and recognition they get from the people and the community. One of the informants implied that joining and participating in the association gives him the assurance of being recognized. He also exemplified confidence in the people around him when he mentioned his burial wishes when the time comes.

I have consulted my subordinates and asked them if they still want me to run this association and they said, "Of course, we would never found anyone like you. When I pass away, all of Marilao's senior citizens – if I would be asked... as the chairman - I would request for them to do the offertory on the middle aisle one Sunday of a specific month with envelopes containing the amounts they are willing to donate."

Another elderly verbalized:

The essence of getting along with other people is that you get the chance to mingle as well as serve them. In that case, when the time comes that you will be in need, those people will recognize and then pay you visits. Do good things to your fellow men. Help them. Maybe someday you will get the same favor back.

The elderly showed the depth of his attachment to craft-making. Even on time of death, he still thinks of the association's future. He thought of craft-making as something that is part of his being. In addition, the elderly reiterated the bonds formed with other people through craft-making. Craft-making offer them opportunity to do good things to others.

## **Discussion**

The participation of the key informants in craft-making activities provided some sort of "nourishment" for them. From the anecdotes presented, craft-making gives them an opportunity to bond and interact with their fellow elderly. Relationships outside the home are also formed and nurtured, thus proving that no one is too old to make friends. The informants generally appeared to be pleased with the social relations they created in craft-making. The positive experiences of the informants may imply improvement of their health perception (Reblin & Uchino, 2008). Thomas, O'Connell, and Gaskin (2013) revealed that in residential facilities, the elderly perceived that they can socialize and interact with other residents since most are open in forming relations. The elderly, specifically in the rural areas, are generally more engaged in socializing activities (Chen & Fu, 2008; Su, Shen, & Zhou, 2006). This may imply the potential of implementing free-time or leisure activities, that can promote socialization. Craft-making may offer measures to increase the elderly's chances of fostering friendships with the other members of the society.

Consistently, the informants have also related their dynamic social activities to positive health status. One informant stressed that past time activities divert his thoughts from sentimentalities which may cause the development of depressive symptoms. Support from family and friends are necessary factors for the development of elderly's emotional wellbeing (Li, Ji, & Chen, 2014). Also, we have identified, from the elderly's experience that partaking in leisure activities and maintaining active social roles in the face of retirement, contribute to the elderly's feelings of flourishing well-being. Social interaction has a vital contribution to the positive perception of health among elderly (Klein, Council, & McGuire, 2005). The informants reiterated that any formal activity realized in a group would augment social networks and may have positive effects on their health and well-being. In other words, playing active social roles and engagement in meaningful activities may significantly contribute to the elderly's positive view of their health.

Culturally, the informants viewed craft making as an essential contribution they can offer to the community. They have sensed the need to impart their knowledge and skills in craft-making to the succeeding generations. They are willing to render their service and function meaningfully as a whole. Elderly are in a constant journey in improving themselves, to inspire others (de Guzman et al., 2007). In addition, craft making is also a mark of gratification that could be passed on to generations (Pöllänen, 2013). Perhaps, craft-making does not only provide the elderly a past-time activity but more essentially, it gives them the feeling of being worthy and indispensable members of the community.

We also found that informants have accepted the reality that death is imminent in their age and likewise, inevitable to everyone. Acceptance of death among elderly and recognition of their strengths and weaknesses are an unconditional treatment the elderly can receive.

Furthermore, the elderly's experience of happiness may contribute to their acceptance and awareness of the aging process and consequently, death (de Guzman et al., 2007).

When most people would see the elderly as unproductive and inefficient, the ability to contribute to the community despite advanced age may fill up their cup with joy and self-satisfaction. Elderly who are engaged in craft-making and produce good outputs may bring feelings of delight and self-fulfillment. In fact, the inter-mix of social, physical, and cognitive activities promote happiness among elderly (von Humboldt & Leal, 2015).

Overall, the elderly's participation in craft-making may define aspects of their lived experiences. The lived experiences of Filipino elderly in craft-making radiate the values of felicity and self-fulfillment, acceptance, belongingness and security, service, friendship and even positive health outlook. Although the findings of phenomenological studies are tentative, our study has suggested insight to the structures of elderly's lived experiences in craft-making.

### Concluding Remarks

In this study, we described the characteristics of lived experiences of the Filipino elderly engaged in craft-making. We gathered the experiential materials using an in-depth, semi-structured interview to recognize and delve further into their experiences of craft-making. Six main themes emerged: fostering friendship, flourishing health, furthering service, facing aging with acceptance, finding felicity and self-fulfillment, feelings of belongingness and security.

From the themes we have identified, we supported the implementation of free-time activities among the elderly. Although it is expected for the elderly to socially deteriorate as they retire from their former roles, the disengagement theory proposes that older people may quit from their previous professional activities but will likely engage themselves in an alternate activity (DeLiema & Bengtson, 2015). The study highlighted the multifaceted characteristics of lived experiences of Filipino elderly engaged in craft making. Positive effects of the activity are intrapersonal and interpersonal in nature. It goes beyond the physical effect that can be provided by a diversion activity.

Although our findings are not generalizable, our study provided an insight on elderly's lived experiences in craft-making. This can be valuable for health practitioners, students, and policymakers in understanding the lived experiences of Filipino elderly and in formulating future leisure programs for elderly. Moreover, it can also be beneficial for future researches in relating the lived experiences of the Filipino elderly and the leisure activity they are into.

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