

Research Article



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A Voyage to the Twilight: Exploring Death Preparation among the Elderly

Abstract

What if the angel of death suddenly came knocking on your door? Death and aging are inevitable. However, since investigations usually assume that death unanimously provokes anxiety, death is often termed the last taboo which makes it painful for most people to talk about, think about, or even plan for it. This study was conducted to determine the philosophies and attitudes of the elderly in terms of the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects of death preparation. The study also sought to determine importance of a support system for the elderly faced or are facing near-death experiences and/or terminal illnesses. The study utilized phenomenology as its research design. Eight informants from the different cities and municipalities of Pangasinan were chosen through purposive sampling. All of them have been involved in a near-death experience and/or are in a dying state. Data was gathered in the form of a semi-structured interview. The study found that the informants' respective concepts of death, the grieving process, their cultivated philosophies, and support system played major roles in helping them prepare for death.



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Key words: *Death, dying, death and dying, death preparation, elderly, geriatrics*

Introduction

What if the angel of death suddenly came knocking on your door? Death and aging are inevitable. However, since investigations usually assume that death unanimously provokes anxiety, death is often termed the last taboo which makes it painful for most people to talk about, think about, or even plan for it. Death is an inescapable phase of every person's journey in life. Death may occur at any time as we go through this journey. One may experience fear, anxiety and apprehension during old age, because as one grows old, the chances of meeting death are greater. But this could also be the perfect time for them to prepare for it.

Death according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, is a permanent cessation of all vital functions: the end of life. However, Marchant & Middleton (2007) said that we are

not completely certain what being dead means because defining death is much more complicated than it appears. In addition, Nettle (2010) mentioned in one of her articles that death is not something to be feared; it is accepted as a small part of the cycle of life.

According to Nesbitt (2009), death is inevitable. He said it is one of the only things guaranteed in this life along with taxes. Regardless of who a person is, or where he / she came from, death is certain. Despite this certainty, people still avoid thinking about it and face it only when it is thrust upon them. Finlayson (2011) described death as an inevitable part of life hence, one must take some time to think about how he / she personally feel about death, death as a whole and also his / her own death. In addition, once they are aware of where their fear lies, they are in a much better position to action a solution to it.

Fear and anxiety are among the most frequently used words to characterize orientations toward death. Investigations typically assume that death universally elicits anxiety. But then, anxiety towards death in the elderly may then be alleviated with appropriate planning and preparations. Planning in advance for your own death can spare your loved ones the anguish of making difficult decisions while in a state of grief. In addition, a study showed that an elderly with sound emotional health, married and with more number of children, with satisfactory family ties and more life satisfaction received less death anxiety scores (Death Anxiety Among Elderly, 2008)

Elisabeth Kubler – Ross has established a basis for understanding how loss affects human life. As she attended to clients with terminal illness, a process of dying became apparent to her. Through her observations and work with dying clients and their families, Kubler – Ross developed a model of five stages to explain what people experience as they grieve and mourn: First is Denial which is characterized by shock and disbelief regarding the loss. Second is Anger which may be expressed toward God, relatives, friends, or health care providers. Third is Bargaining which occurs when the person asks God or fate for more time to delay the inevitable loss. Depression follows, which results when awareness of the loss becomes acute. The last stage of the grieving process according to Kubler – Ross is the Acceptance stage, which occurs when the person shows evidence of coming to terms with death (Videbeck, 2006).

Kubler-Ross' model of the 5 stages of grief was introduced in the book *On Death and Dying* written by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. However, this theory has been refuted by many authors who claim that these stages do not justly explain the process of grief. They believe grief is too complicated to be defined by just seven neat little stages. For most people, it is an engulfing flurry of varied emotions. There is no scientific backup or public consensus which supports that two people will go through the same types of stages while mourning for their loved ones.

Domingo, Asis, Jose & Kabamalan (1993) approached the study of living arrangements among the elderly in the Philippines by exploring the views of the elderly and family members on various issues: actual living arrangements, preferred living arrangements, with a focus on the young and old, the living arrangements of the frail elderly, benefits of co-residence, strains of co-residence, factors encouraging co-residence, social changes and the factors

that threaten the family's ability to care for the elderly, and prospects for institutionalized care for the elderly. The study used data from a set of transcripts from 18 focus group discussions conducted in Metro Manila and two rural villages in 1990 and 1991. Participants consisted of the elderly (ages 60-85) and adult children (ages 35-55). Results showed a close correspondence between actual co-residence and preference for such an arrangement, although there were indications that some elderly would prefer to be on their own were it not for factors such as the children's needs and health reasons.

Applying these in this study, I aim to discern how the elderly perceive death, the stages that they undergo whenever they experience loss of wellness, their attitudes and philosophies about the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects of death preparation, and lastly, the effects of having a support system to an elderly who faces death.

Methods

I utilized phenomenology as the research design of this qualitative study. A qualitative interview research design was chosen as an appropriate means of obtaining data relevant to the assimilation of elderly towards death preparation. According to Bodgan and Taylor (1975, p.4) "qualitative methodologies refer to research procedures which produce descriptive data: people's own written or spoken works and observable behavior". Ely, et al. (1991, p.4) noted that qualitative research is better understood by the characteristics of its methods than by a definition. Among the characteristics of qualitative research are the following: "qualitative researchers want those who are studied to speak for themselves, to provide their perspectives in works and other actions. Therefore, qualitative research is an interactive process in which the persons studied teach the researcher about their lives. Qualitative researchers attend to the experience as a whole, not as separate variables". This study has utilized descriptive phenomenology as its research design.

Eight informants were purposively selected for this study from four cities/municipalities in Pangasinan namely: San Carlos City, Dagupan City, Urdaneta City, and Villasis. These areas were chosen since the researcher is an inhabitant of the Pangasinan, hence the relevant data needed for the success of the study will be very much accessible. *Extreme case sampling was utilized*, which focuses on cases that are rich in information because they are unusual or special in some way. The selection of

informants used the following criteria: must either be a male or a female resident of Pangasinan, 60 years old and above, must possess a sound mind, must have had a near death experience before or is presently having a terminal illness during the time of the interview, and they must be living with others. Four of the informants are Ilocanos and the other four are Pangasinenses.

I utilized social integration to build rapport with the informants. This was followed by individual interviews. A semi-structured interview was used by utilizing standardized open-ended questions. All responses of the informants were recorded and then transcribed. The informants' names were replaced with planet names to maintain confidentiality.

Brief descriptions of the informants are as follows:

Venus, 86 year old female is an Ilocano and is a resident of Villasis. She is a retired teacher. She lives with her son, and grandchildren. She has been hit by a tricycle on 2005, which led to a temporary loss of consciousness.

Mars, 82 years old female is an Ilocano and is a resident of Villasis. She is a housewife and lives with her daughter and her family. She was diagnosed with a pleural effusion.

Jupiter, 68 years old male, is an Ilocano, and is a resident of Urdaneta City. He lives with his eldest daughter, son-in-law, and his grandchildren. He usually stays in and watches over their small store. Jupiter was hospitalized due to uncontrolled coughing. He was hospitalized on 2009.

Neptune, 70 years old male, is an Ilocano, and is a resident of Urdaneta City. Neptune lives with his wife. He is a faith healer. Neptune's house contains various religious icons and the altar is situated right in front of his door. He had a heat stroke on 2004.

Earth, 85 years old female, is a Pangasinense, and is a resident of San Carlos City. She is a retired teacher. She lives with her two granddaughters and her husband, who is bedridden due to Parkinson's disease. Earth had a heart attack on 1975. Another near-death experience that she had was when she had an internal bleeding during her operation with her second child. She said that it was crucial since it is either her or her child will die. Eventually both survived.

Mercury, 88 years old female, is a Pangasinense. She lives with her granddaughters in Dagupan City. Mercury had a stroke then. But she has recuperated. The only problem she has during the interview is her blurring vision.

Saturn, 65 years old male, is a Pangasinense who lives in San Carlos City. He stays with his wife, and his son. Saturn is a farmer who had a stroke on 2011. He stayed in the Intensive Care Unit for almost a week.

Pluto, 73 years old male, is a resident of Dagupan City. He is a Pangasinense who lives with his diabetic wife and bedridden son. Pluto was diagnosed with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease and is already in the terminal stage of the disease. An oxygen tank is placed on his bedside. Pluto's legs were already edematous. His wife looks after his home health and palliative care.

Data were presented from the perspective of the lived experiences of the informants. These experiences were then compared to identify similarities and differences. Moreover, non-verbal responses of the informants were noted in the interview protocol sheet. All salient statements were reduced to generate themes and sub-themes. The recorded interviews were later destroyed.

Informed consent were requested before the interviews and the informants were told that they can withdraw from the study any time they wish to. Privacy and confidentiality were observed dutifully through the course of this study.

Findings

The following are the findings and analysis of the informants' statements about dying and death highlighting the four major themes and their respective sub-themes. The themes included The Meaning of Death, The Sequence of Living in a State of Dying, The Philosophies of an Elderly's Living Soul, and Significance of a Support System.

I. The Meaning of Death

Death may be defined in various ways. But for the informants, who have been involved in a near-death experience, death is defined in two ways: it is an inevitable phenomenon and it is a portal to the Creator's realm.

A. Inevitable event

The informants thought of death as an inescapable phenomenon. Death is a part of life.

They said that they cannot do anything about it:

Venus: "Kung yan ang gusto ng panginoon na mamatay na ako, wala naman akong magagawa." (*If the will of God is for me to die, I cannot do anything*)

Mercury: "Nu alaen to ak la (refers to the Supreme Being), antoy nagawaan mo ey?" (*If He will get me [refers to the Supreme Being], what can I do?*)

The informants have one phrase in common which convey how inevitable death is. The phrase "I cannot do anything" entails the paramount surrender of their hopes that they too, will face death as a conclusion of their being.

B. Portal to the Creator's Realm

Death was also associated to a door, which opens to another world, another domain, or another dimension.

Pluto: "Death for me is a sign of God, because you can't go to heaven if you will not die. Papaano ka makakapunta ng langit kung buhay ka? Kaya mamatay ka muna bago ka pumuntang heaven." (*"Death for me is a sign of God, because you cannot go to heaven if you will not die. How will you go to heaven if you are still alive? That is why you still need to die before entering heaven."*)

Earth: "Ooohh.. That is second life. Ang alam ko sa death, ay paradise. My dream, my wish, and my prayer is to go with the Lord. Yan ang iniisip ko. Ayoko yung eternal fire." (*"Ooohh.. [Amazed by the question, "What is death for you?"] That is second life. Death is a paradise. My dream, my wish, and my prayer is to go with the Lord. That is what I think of. I do not want the eternal fire."*)

II. The Sequence of Living in a State of Dying

This sequence has been adopted from Elisabeth Kubler-Ross' Stages of Grieving Process. Based on the informants' responses, I have identified Realization as a part of the grieving process and it is manifested before the stage of Bargaining. The Grieving Process is a progression of stages that a person undergoes as he / she perceives a loss. This loss may indicate various things such as the loss of a loved one, loss of a job, loss of an important object and even a perceived loss of self. The informants in this study have had perceived losses of selves and their health during their near-death experiences.

A. Denial

Denial is a defense mechanism used by an individual to escape from unwanted thoughts, feelings, emotions, or situations. Denial is manifested among the informants when they doubt their perceived losses of selves and resort to not wanting to talk about such loss.

Jupiter: "Hindi ko alam ang kamatayan kasi hindi ko pa nasubukan. (laughs)" (*"I do not know what death is, because I have not experienced dying yet."* [laughs])

Neptune: "Sa akin walang kamatayan. Ayan oh (points at his altar filled with religious icons), Sila ang gumamot sa akin." (*"As for me, there is no death. Look, [points at his altar filled with religious icons], they were the ones who treated me."*)

Mars: "Hindi ko pa nakausap ang mga kamag-anak ko kung sakaling mamatay ako. Wala pa kasi sa isip ko ang mamatay. Hindi ko pa naiisip ang preparasyon sa aking kamatayan kasi wala naman akong sakit. Ayokong pag-usapan pa yan." (*I have not talked to my relatives yet if ever I would die. Dying is not yet in my thoughts. I have not thought of any preparations regarding my death yet, because I have no illness. I don't want to talk about it yet."*)

B. Anger

Anger can be a normal and healthy reaction when situations or circumstances are unfair or unjust. But anger becomes negative when the person denies it, suppresses it, or expresses it inappropriately.

Pluto: "I'm suffering from my sins. Pag sinumpong yan (points at his chest, referring to his lungs), hindi ko talaga alam kung ano'ng susunod na mangyayari. Kaya kung minsan, nakakapagsabi ako sa Panginoon na "Parang hindi nyo ako anak. Bakit hanggang ngayon, wala parin akong nararamdamang kahit na pagbabago? Nung una, I doubted God, pero nabasa ko sa bible, na ang nagbigay sa akin ng sakit ay ang demonyo. Kasi ang Diyos hindi nagbibigay ng sakit yan eh. Nagpapagaling." (*I am suffering from my sins. When this flares up, [points at his chest, referring to his lungs] I usually am not knowledgeable of what will happen next. That is why sometimes, I question the Lord, "It is as if I am not your child. Why is it that until now, I am not feeling any change at*

all? At first, I doubted God, but when I have read the bible, it said that the devil is responsible for my giving me my disease.)

C. Realization

Realization stage among informants happened through either one of the two components of this stage: (a) realization of the *Causes* of the illness / near death experience; and, (b) realization of the *Effects* of having the illness / near death experience. The realization of the causes of the illness / near death experience was expressed by some of the informants:

Pluto: "Siguro, sa dami ng kasalanan ko, ito ako ngayon; nagsusuffer. At ang suffering na ito... excuse me...(Coughs) alam mo... ahhhmm... pahinga muna ako sandali. Hinihingal ako kapag napapagod... dadalhin ako sa kamatayan." *(Maybe, because of the many sins that I have committed, this is what I am now; suffering. And this suffering... excuse me... [coughs] you know... ahhhmm... I will rest for a while. I easily gasp when I get tired... will bring me to death.)*

Jupiter: "Magaling akong manigarilyo noon. Pinagbawal na ng doktor na manigarilyo ako, kasi yun daw ang ikakamatay ko, kaya hininto ko na kasi gusto ko pang mabuhay." *(I am good at smoking before. The doctor prohibited me to smoke, because it will be the cause of my death, that is why I have stopped it because I still want to live.)*

Regret is a salient point in this component of the realization stage. It is through regret that one thinks of change to counteract the illness that they once had or are having in the present.

The following talks about the realization of the effects of the illness / near death experience according to the informant:

Earth: "When I had those near death experiences (heart attack and internal bleeding during an operation), naisip ko yung mga children ko. Kung mawawala ako, paano na sila, kasi wala na silang guidance. Hindi masyado sa lalaki ang ganun (referring to her husband)" *(When I had those near death experiences [heart attack and internal bleeding during an operation], I have thought of my children. If I will die, how will they be, because I can no longer guide them? This is not usual among males [referring to her husband].)*

Realization of the effect(s) of the illness or near death experience is a way of determining various possibilities which may be caused by the existing problem. Conceptualization is a salient point in this component of the realization stage and it is where one plans for the future.

D. Bargaining

Bargaining is where a person asks God or those whom he / she thinks as superior (such as doctors) for more time to postpone the foreseeable loss.

Mars: "Kung kukunin na ako ng Diyos, di handa na ako. Pero kung maaari sana hindi pa. Kayat ko pay ti ag-biag. (laughs)" *(If God would get me, then I would be prepared. However, if possible, he would not get me yet. I still want to live.) [laughs]*

Mercury: "Mikakasi ak labat la ya amay makmaksil su laman ko agew, labi. Mikakasi ak lanlanang ya sayay matak et makanengneng labat anggano daiset kwanko." *(I pray that I would still be having a strong body, day and night. I always pray that my eyes could see even just a little.)*

Pluto: "Ang ginagawa kong devotion ngayon, humihingi ako ng tawad sa Panginoon, nagbabagong buhay (voice trembles and eyes became teary). Na sana patawarin ako. Bigyan pa Niya sana ako ng konting panahon kasi mga apo ko, maliliit pa eh. Gusto ko pa silang makitang lumaki" *(The devotion that I am doing today, is that I ask God for forgiveness, I am trying to change my life for the better [voice trembles and eyes became teary]. I hope He would forgive me. I hope He would give me a little more time because my grandchildren are still small. I still want to see them grow.)*

Saturn: "Mandadasal ak ya lanang ya kumon unabig ak tapyan napabaleg ko ni iray apo'k" *(I always pray for me to recover so that I could still guide my grandchildren as they grow.)*

Neptune: "Nung nagkasakit ako, hindi naman ako nagalit sa Kanya. Sa halip, nagdasal ako, "God, sana tulungan mo pa akong mabuhay ng matagal kasi gusto ko pang makita ang apo ko" kasi nasa malayo pa siya noon eh." *(When I got sick, I never really got mad at Him. Instead, I prayed, "God, I hope You would help me to live longer because I still want to see my grandchild." My grandchild was far away from me that time.)*

Venus: "Maganda naman ang pananalig ko sa Diyos. Nung hindi pa ako matanda, lagi akong nagsisimba. Member ako sa church noon. Ngayon naman, nagdadasal ako sa Apo na sana tulungan nya akong mabuhay pa para makita ko pa ang mga anak kong nasa malayo at sana may pension pa sila hanggang ngayon." (*"My faith with the Lord is good. When I was not that old yet, I always attend Church masses. I was a member of the church back then. Now, I am praying to God that He would help me to live longer so that I may still be able to see my children from afar, and I hope that they are still receiving their pensions today."*)

The informants stated that they are prepared to die but if possible, they are bargaining with God for a longer life to do some things for their families.

E. Depression

According to Kubler-Ross, depression results when awareness of the loss becomes acute. Hopelessness may affect the person's physical being. In the case of some informants, it resulted to disturbed sleeping patterns:

Saturn: "Nu unya ak lanlamang ay (referring to when he was still immobile and dependent due to stroke attack), gabay ko ni lanlamang su umpatey kwanko. Nu talagan kapalaran ko, kapalaran kon talaga. Maminsan agak makaugip." (*"I told myself: If this is how it is really supposed to be [referring to when he was still immobile and dependent due to stroke attack], I would rather choose to die. If it is really my fate, then be it. Sometimes I find it hard to sleep."*)

Pluto: "So I'm keeping myself busy to be close to God. Yun ang ginagawa ko ngayon. Nights and days; kulang pa nga ako ng tulog eh. Tignan mo tong mata ko, malalim na. Insomniac na ako. Complicated na ang lahat. Lumaki na yung puso ko eh. Yun na ang last choice ko." (*"So I am keeping myself busy to be close to God. That is what I am doing today. Nights and days; As a matter of fact, I still am lacking some sleep. Look at my eyes, they are already deep. I am an insomniac. Everything now is complicated. My heart is already enlarged. That is my last choice."*)

F. Acceptance

Acceptance is where the affected person may say that he could combat the illness or might as well just prepare for it instead. Preparedness happens when choice is no longer an option. I have found

out that acceptance goes with two factors. First, acceptance happens because they no longer have any choice since it is God's willpower to give them such trials.

Venus: "Oo, handa na akong mamatay. Wala na akong magagawa kung iyon ang gusto ng Apo." (*"Yes, I am ready to die. I cannot do anything if it is God's will."*)

Pluto: So whether you like it or not, you must have to accept what God will give you. (*"So whether you like it or not, you must have to accept what God will give you."*)

Second, acceptance happens because of a mission met in life.

Saturn: "Nu kapalaran ko, umpatey ak la; talagan untay bilay kwanko. Tinanggap ko la. Ta ankabaleg la ray anako" (*"If it is my fate, then I would die; that is life, I said. Besides, my children are already grown-ups."*)

III. The Philosophies of the Elderly

The following subthemes make up the philosophies or attitudes of the elderly persons as they prepare themselves for death in terms of the physical, psychosocial, and spiritual aspects:

A. "Bahala na"

The informants have demonstrated the "bahala na" (*"come what may"*) system, a common aspect of Filipino culture, in terms of preparations and expenses when they die, leaving all things up to God or to their loved ones. Financial constraint is the main reason for having this philosophy among the informants.

Venus: "Hindi ko pa sila nakakausap tungkol sa aking kamatayan. Sila na lang bahala sa akin kung mamamatay na ako." (*"I have not talked to them [referring to the relatives] yet regarding my death. I will just have to leave it all up to them when I die."*)

Venus: "Hindi ko pa sila nakakausap tungkol sa aking kamatayan. Sila na lang bahala sa akin kung mamamatay na ako." (*"I have not talked to them [referring to the relatives] yet regarding my death. I will just have to leave it all up to them when I die."*)

Mars: "Mga kamag-anak ko na ang bahala. Nakapasok naman ako sa Senior Citizen Association. Kasi pag namatay ako, may ibibigay ang Senior Citizen." (*It will all be up to my*

relatives. *I am a member of the Senior Citizen Association. If I die, the association will help out.*")

Neptune: "Kung lote lang na paglilibingan sa akin ang pinag-uusapan, meron na doon sa byenan ko. Ang pangastos lang ang wala pa sa ngayon. Kapag namatay ako, bahala na yung mga maiwan. Pero si misis, meron siyang mahuhugot sa buwan buwan niyang binabayaran sa insurance." (*"If you were to ask me about the lot where I would want to be buried, then it is not a problem. I already have one which was the lot used by my late mother-in-law. When I die, it will all be up to the one who is left. However my wife will have something to spend coming from the monthly insurances that she is paying."*)

Mercury: "Anggapo ni ginawak ya preparasyon ed ipatey ko. Saray agik lay akauley ed siak. Sikaray pikakasian ko, syempre anggapoy pakayarian daray anako. Imbagak ed sika ra, bukot-bukoten ta kila nu umpatey ak. Say kwanda, ay agyo ibabaga tan nanang ta anggapoy mangipunpon ed sikayo nu inatey kami met la (laughs)" (*"I have not done any preparations yet regarding my death. It will all be up to my siblings when I die. I always plead them, because of course, my children have nothing to spend too when I die. I told them that I would haunt them when I die, and they told me that I should not because no one would take charge of my burial if they die too. [laughs]"*)

Earth: "Sabi naming mag-asawa dati, kung sino ang mauuna, yung maiwan ang bahala sa pagpapalibing and all. (Laughs) Besides, may lote na kami sa public cemetery, dun sa mother ko. I will also get some benefits from a life plan when I die because I have been availing from their promos." (*"My husband and I have decided that whoever from us dies first, the one left will be responsible for the burial and all [laughs]. Besides, we already have a lot in the public cemetery, where my late mother is buried too. I will also get some benefits from a life plan when I die because I have been availing from their promos."*)

B. Family-oriented

Like most Filipinos, the informants value their families. Attachment is the salient point in this elderly philosophy; they want to live longer so that they can spend more time with their families.

Jupiter: "Ipinagdarasal ko na sana humaba pa ang buhay ko para makita ko pa ang mga apo ko, pag mag-aasawa na sila, ganun." (*"I always pray for a longer life, so that I could still see my grandchildren until they get married."*)

Pluto: "Bigyan pa Niya sana ako ng konting panahon kasi mga apo ko, maliliit pa eh. Gusto ko pa silang makitang lumaki." (*"I hope He would give me a little more time because my grandchildren are still small. I still want to see them grow."*)

C. Belief that God Extends Life

The informants believe in the existence of a Creator. The Creator has the power to make them live longer through divine healing and they become closer to God through prayers.

Mars: "Mabuti naman ang pagdarasal ko ngayon. Mas malapit ako sa Diyos ngayon kasi gusto kong mabuhay pa." (*"My devotion is fine. I became closer to God now because I still want to live."*)

Mercury: "Mas imasingger ak lalaingen ed Diyos natan ya tinmakken ak tapian mikasi ka ak andukey ni bilay ko." (*"I was brought closer to God, especially now that I grew older, so that I could ask for a longer life."*)

Pluto: "So I'm keeping myself busy to be close to God. Yun ang ginagawa ko ngayon." (*"So I am keeping myself busy to be close to God. That is what I do today."*)

Saturn: "Mas naging malapit ak ed Diyos natan ya nansakit ak, ta sikato labat su makatambal basta mikasi ka ed sikato." (*"I became closer to God when I got ill, because He is the only one who could cure me for as long as I keep my faith on Him."*)

IV. Significance of a Support System

Support system may be the presence of loved ones, financial support, and moral support, among others. Fajemilehin and Odebiyi (2011) argued that living with spouse and the type of marriage (be it mono or polygynous) were relevant for positive health behaviours during old age. I have found out in this study that a support system has two kinds of effects among the informants: first, it serves as a cure; and second, it could strengthen family ties:

a. The Cure

The presence of a support system was one of the reasons why the informants have survived their

ordeals or why they are still thriving. When the informants were ill, it was their loved ones who took care of them. One of the informants even stated that financial support may be a good factor of his living but without the presence of a physical care, and then it would not be possible for him to live.

Pluto: "Itong asawa ko, siya lahat ang gumagawa dito sa bahay. At may mga anak din ako na nasa abroad, tumutulong sila financially sa mga pangangailangan namin dito. Maganda ang epekto nila sa pagtanda ko. Isipin mo kapag wala itong asawa ko. Paano na lang kami ng anak ko? Baka matagal na kaming wala. Kahit pa may perang pang-sustento sa iyo, kung wala namang mag-aalaga, useless. My life was extended because of her help." (*My wife does all the chores in the house. I also have some children abroad who help me financially with our needs here. They have a good effect with my elderly life. Imagine life without my wife. How will I and my son be? Maybe we have died for a long time already. Even if there is money to support us, if there is no one to care, it is useless. My life was extended because of her help.*)

Saturn: "Sikara'y (Referring to his family members whom he is living with) manaasikaso ed siyak nen mansasakit ak. Nu anggapo ira, umpano agak la immabig, umpano sikato lay ipatey ko. Balbaleg su pakatulong da ed impan-abig ko natan." (*They [Referring to his family members whom he is living with] are the ones taking care of me when I was ill. If they were not around, maybe would not be healed, and will be the reason for my death. They are of big help to my health's improvement.*)

Earth: "The people around me play a big role kung bakit andito pa ako sa mundo ngayon. Without their support and care, I might not be able to be talking to you right now." (*The people around me play a big role, and they are the reason why I am still in this world today. Without their support and care, I might not be able to be talking to you right now.*)

b. Strengthened Family Ties

Another significance of having a support system is that it strengthens family relationships. The presence of a support system during the time of illness created a better understanding of their relationships..

Earth: "The people around me plays a big role kung bakit andito pa ako sa mundo ngayon.

Without their support and care, I might not be able to be talking to you right now. Lalo na yung isang apo ko. Talagang hindi niya ako pinapabayaan. Minsan, tatabihan pa niya ako sa pagtulog sa gabi. Mas naging malapit kami sa isa't isa dahil narin sa pag-aalaga niya sa akin." (*"The people around me play a big role and they are the reason why I am still in this world today. Without their support and care, I might not be able to be talking to you right now. My other granddaughter never leaves me behind. Sometimes, she sleeps with me at night. We became even closer with each other because of how she cares for me."*)

Neptune: "Mas matibay ang relasyon naming mag-asawa ngayong tumanda na kami at kaming dalawa na lang sa bahay. Kung ano ang ayaw ng asawa ko, hindi ko gagawin. Kung ano ang ayaw ko naman, hindi din niya gagawin. Nirerespeto naming ang isa't isa. Minsan kahit na ganito na kami katanda, naghoholding hands pa kami. Kami-kami narin ang nag-aalaga sa isa't isa ngayon." (*My relationship with my wife strengthened now that we are already old, and that it is just the two of us living together now. I do not do what she do not like. She do not do what I do not like. We respect each other. Sometimes we even hold hands while we are walking, even if we were this old. We take care of each other.*)

Discussion

The methodology of this study attempts to deepen our understanding of the elderly at the last stage of their life. Only naturally, we value newness and energy. We avoid the old. Oftentimes, social death occurs before biological death. Marjorie Kagawa-Singer in her study called *Diverse Cultural Beliefs and Practices About Death and Dying in the Elderly* wrote about this stage in life as "graying". It occurs when the elderlies inch toward the peripheries as their social value decreases. At death, many elderly are peripheral to families and younger community members (Kagawa-Singer, 2008). In this graying, they are rarely seen or heard. Hence, this study's strategic methodology banked upon the elderlies' thoughts and opinions.

The study utilized the qualitative research method of open-ended interview where the informants were able to express their own thoughts regarding the topic of death. This strategy provided the study with the perspective of the elderly, hence a rigorous and genuine means of extracting the essence of their human experience during their twilight years. The study of Chan and Yau (2010) probed

deeper focus on this stage, especially for an elderly. They highlighted the importance of the process of dying and coping, and how it is supposed to help the elderly to achieve ego integrity even during this final stage of their life.

The questions and gathered answers were grouped into varying themes in relation with their respective questions to resemble an essential structural whole. The themes brought together built a strong organic definition of death: it is inevitable because it is in God's plans.

This is consistent with the research findings on the elderly's philosophies which primarily revolve on religion – its operative definition being afterlife. Ya Hui Wen (2012) showed that there is lower death anxiety in people with strong, integral religious views and greater in people with more expedient religious beliefs. The promise of afterlife provides people with enough strength to cope and overcome the initial anxiety and grief. This leads to acceptance, where their family and support system awaits them in warmth welcome, making peace to the near end of their human experience and leading them to a new dimension of life.

Despite the complex array of feelings and stages of grief brought upon the immediacy of death, the informants found positive aspects in the meaning and overcoming of their twilight years. Hope and calm were created through recollection and rebuilding of their relationship with their immediate social circle, and a rekindling of their religious faith. The findings in this qualitative study ultimately leads to the positive influence of religion on death acceptance. The crucial key points proven by the statements of the informants were: religiosity, its operative term being afterlife and extending to their family and support system. Their faith lead to strengthened family ties and through the grace of God, a form of hope and acceptance of their situation.

The influence of religiosity to an elder's handling of death anxiety and acceptance as manifested in this study ("How will you go to heaven if you are still alive?" – Pluto; "Yes, I am ready to die. I cannot do anything if it is God's will." – Venus) is parallel to the study by Falkenhain & Handal (2003) claiming a relationship between belief in afterlife and intrinsic religion and death acceptance. In the process of examining the relationship between religion and death anxiety, it was noted that a significant sample of elderly look at afterlife as a mediating variable in their relationship between religion and death anxiety.

Plenty of literatures focused on the strong pull of religiosity in the face of death. Most discovered a positive relationship between religious beliefs and clinically meaningful levels of death anxiety. This study, however, did not intentionally bring up religion: it naturally came out of the informant's experiences and thoughts. Their definition of death is strongly anchored on its inevitability, an inevitability they attribute to the all powerful being, God. The faith that they dedicate to God is so strong and all-encompassing it influences not only how they perceive death but as well as their belief that their lives can be prolonged and extended with adequate prayers and devotion. As much as they surrender everything to God, this is still largely symbolic of how much faith they have in God: he can take your life, and only he too can give you a longer one; as Mars said, "I became closer to God now because I still want to live".

Fear is only natural. Despite acknowledging God's will and the promise of heaven, people still fear death. As Finlayson (2011) said, "death is something which many people avoid thinking about until such a time it is thrust upon them". As we grow older, the immediacy of death increases until such a time that it is staring us right in the face: this is how it feels like for the elderly.

Conclusions

Despite the different stages and approaches people write about and take on when it comes to accepting and coping death, this study focused and found out what becomes most significant when an elderly approaches his twilight years: religion and family.

The study found out the elderlies' deepest thoughts when it comes to this final stage of their human experience. Contrary to being peripheral in their family and younger community members, they were able to voice out what it means to die and how it is making them feel. With strong religious influences affecting their perception of death and coping, ultimately it all boils down to their connection with their family which they gladly rekindled through the grace of God. Since the reason why we go through life despite knowing it will end one day is the people we value and who in turn, value us. We may vary with the way we handle death and bereavement, and in the cultural processes that go with dying and grieving but we are all the same: we are all trying to make the best of the time God gave us in this planet.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from this study, it is thus recommended that a similar study, having teenagers or other age groups who have encountered near-death experiences as its informants, should be conducted to provide a more holistic perception about death all throughout life. Moreover, since the study focused on elderly persons with significant others, it is also recommended that a similar study could be steered on elderly persons who are living alone to know whether or not their death perceptions would vary or not. Furthermore, other factors, such as economic status, religion, educational attainment, and the like may be utilized in the conduct of an analogous study to provide a holistic approach in the view of death.

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