



## Explaining the concept of human interactions on Iranian old people's dignity: a qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT

Old age brings about distinctive characteristics in elderly people and necessitates recognizing their human dignity. Dignity could include self-respect, self-esteem, and integrity in the elderly and others could have a direct role in preserving or undermining it. The present study was carried out to clarify the content of human interactions and their impact on elderly Iranians' human dignity. This qualitative research applied a content-analysis method. It used purposeful sampling as well as in-depth and semi-structured interviews with 16 elderly Iranians in Tehran in 1394. In order to analyze the data, the interview transcripts were input into the MAXQDA software, by using which the data were coded. According to the data analysis, the extracted themes concerning the impact of human interactions on elderly Iranians' dignity comprised 3 main themes and 10 subthemes. The major themes were acceptance, leisure activities, and privacy protection. The subthemes consisted of the family's understanding of the elderly, veneration of their presence in the family, consideration for their interests, nature excursions, occupation and diversion, association, social recreations, personal and familial privacy, environmental privacy, and social privacy. These all emerged from the participants' experiences. The results indicate that it seems vital to provide necessary conditions for the maintenance of elderly people's familial and social interactions with the aim of bolstering their morale and preserving their human dignity. Moreover, one of the most practical approaches to holding patients in reverence is to abide by the Charter of Rights for the Elderly.

**Keywords:** Content analysis, elderly people, Human dignity, Interaction

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, one of the primary challenges in all societies is the increase in the population of the elderly, which has arisen as a consequence of factors such as a reduction in the mortality rate, downward trend in the population growth, and growth in life expectancy [1]. The aging process is both irreversible and progressive and occurs in all people at various intensity levels [2]. According to the statistics released by the Statistical Center of Iran, the upward trend in the growth of the elderly population is presently more than 7.3% of the Iranian population. The 2011 population census performed by the Statistical Center revealed that 8.2% of the country's population were at an old age and, therefore, there were 6 million elderly people in Iran in 2011. From the perspectives of sociology,

economics, and health, these statistics are highly significant [3]. Since old age brings about distinctive characteristics in the elderly, it is particularly noteworthy to pay attention to human dignity among the elderly [4]. The word dignity comes from the Latin words *dignitas* and *dingus*, meaning “to be worthy,” and *decet*, meaning “decent” or “fitting” [5, 6]. Dignity is a serious and composed manner or behavior suggesting the observance of decorum and reverence one is deserving of [7]. Gallagher [8] asserts that the concept of dignity is a subjective and moral experience, which everybody has by virtue of being a human [8]. As an ability to feel valued, dignity is shaped through interactions with other people. Moreover, association with others could restrict or promote it. Dignity has also been defined as self-worth and self-respect. Furthermore, dignity is the forming of a judgment about others’ behavior and is the reaction provoked by respecting them. It is the behavior which shows reverence. In other words, people who respect themselves and others possess dignity [9, 10]. In fact, dignity is a quality which brings a human elation and happiness. It is also a subjective experience of making a judgment about others [8]. Dignity could include self-respect, self-confidence, self-esteem, integrity, honesty, and privacy in elderly people and others could have a direct role in preserving or undermining it [11, 12]. Possessing dignity at an old age makes the elderly person feel content with the care provided, which results in the improvement of the quality of life. Truthfully, elderly people’s dignity has a close relationship with the quality of life. Hence, it is necessary to know the essence of factors influencing dignity and understand the phenomenon in the elderly, which will lead to a better understanding of them [11]. Jakobsen and Sørli [13] contend that developing interactions accompanied by congeniality and sympathy brings about self-confidence, encouragement, and hope in the elderly person. This means that others’ respectful manner shapes the elderly person’s real dignity and value [13]. However, solitude and the lack of social interactions might affect the quality of the elderly person’s life [14].

Therefore, since no study has been conducted so far about Explaining the concept of human interactions on Iranian old people’s dignity in Iranian society, the researchers of the present study decided to carry out a study concerning the effect of human interactions on elderly Iranians’ dignity with a qualitative approach and the content-analysis method.

#### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present research is a qualitative study which employs the content-analysis method and conventional approach. It was performed on some Iranian elderly people in parks, mosques, and homes in Tehran in 1394. The study population consisted of 16 elderly people. The inclusion criteria were as follows: the absence of any cognitive disorder, no diagnosis of a mental disorder, age over 60, and ability to speak Persian. They were selected by using purposeful sampling and, after informed consent was obtained, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with them for 30-45 minutes. The interview began with a general question about their daily life experience and then searching questions were posed so as to encourage them and acquire detailed information. Moreover, they were asked to, for instance, speak from experience about the interaction effects on your human dignity. After each interview, in the least possible time, the recorded data were carefully examined, transcribed verbatim, and typed. The typed data were compared with the recordings once more. The data analysis began during the initial stages of the data collection. This contributes to the back-and-forth movement between the concept formulation and data collection and can direct future data collection so as to acquire data appropriate for answering research questions [15]. During the process of the data analysis, first, analysis units were identified. In the present research, the whole text of each interview was regarded as an analysis unit. Next, meaning units were determined. Phrases and sentences included different aspects of the main concept. Coding was then done. During this process, the meaning units were condensed and labeled with codes, which were abstracted and classified into categories. In the end, the categories recurring regularly formed themes [16, 17]. In order for data credibility, the following were applied: prolonged engagement, fusion in the data collection [field notes, handwritten accounts, and recordings], peer-review, and persistent comparison of the data. Dependability shows the consistency and reliability of data. For this, a member check was conducted by applying the colleagues’ supplementary comments and asking the participants to review the written accounts. Data confirmability was achieved by submitting the reports, written accounts, and notes to two nursing professors and receiving the results. The transferability of the study was established by an in-depth description of the data [18, 19].

As for ethical considerations, it must be mentioned that this study stems from a research program. It was approved by the Ethics Committee in Baqiyatallah University of Medical Sciences. After collecting the data, the research goals were explained to the participants and, after their consent was obtained, the interviews with them were

recorded. Their data were treated confidentially and anonymously and kept in a safe place. In addition, the participants were free to participate in or decline to participate in or withdraw from the research.

## RESULTS

In the current study, 16 elderly people [9 females and 7 males] in the 60-84 age range participated. From among them, 6, 2, and 8 were respectively widowed, divorced, and married. Their educational levels ranged from Grade 3 to a master's degree. On average, they had 1 to 6 children. Based on the data analysis in this study, the extracted themes concerning the impact of human interactions on elderly Iranians' dignity are illustrated in [Table 1](#). They comprise 3 main themes and 10 subthemes. The major themes were acceptance, leisure activities, and privacy protection. The subthemes consisted of the family's understanding of the elderly, veneration of their presence in the family, consideration for their interests, nature excursions, occupation and diversion, association, social recreations, personal and familial privacy, environmental privacy, and social privacy. These all emerged from the participants' experiences.

**Table 1. The extracted themes**

Main themes	Subthemes
Acceptance	Understanding of the elderly Veneration of their presence in the family Consideration for their interests
Leisure activities	Nature excursions Occupation and diversion Association Social recreations
Privacy protection	Personal and familial privacy Environmental privacy Social privacy

**Table 2. The participants' demographic characteristics**

Interviewee's no.	Gender	Educational level	Age [years]	Marital status
1	Female	Grade 5	75	Married
2	Female	Master's degree	67	Married
3	Male	High school diploma	73	Married
4	Male	Secondary education degree	84	Married
5	Female	Intermediate cycle degree	70	Married
6	Female	Grade 6	79	Widowed
7	Male	High school diploma	79	Widowed
8	Female	Intermediate cycle degree	80	Widowed
9	Male	Master's degree	65	Married
10	Female	Grade 3	73	Married
11	Male	Intermediate cycle degree	74	Married
12	Male	Bachelor's degree	67	Widowed
13	Female	Master's degree	68	Married
14	Female	High school diploma	66	Widowed
15	Female	High school diploma	72	Divorced
16	Male	Intermediate cycle degree	60	Divorced

### I. Acceptance

One of the main themes emerging in this study was acceptance, which, according to the elderly participants' experiences, encompassed the family's understanding of the elderly, veneration of their presence in the family, and consideration for their interests.

#### I. i. The family's understanding of the elderly

The elderly participants believed that, from the perspective of human dignity, it was necessary for family members to have an understanding of them and to take into consideration their physical and mental preparation as well as their mood for performing daily and leisure activities. A 73-year-old man said:

“The children don't understand my beliefs. They're saying I'm old and my beliefs are out. This upsets me. For example, on Yalda Night, wish all of the children would gather in our home to be together. I believe elders should

gather children to be all together. [But] they don't come [and] say they are busy [and] say, "These beliefs are out. Gee, get rid of them." This upsets me. They must understand me [and] be respectful".

Moreover, the elderly people's experiences showed that, upon the development of technology and a reduction in their ability to learn, children do not understand them, which makes them distressed and prevents them from being held in reverence. A 68-year-old woman, who had a master's degree, believed:

"Nowadays, the vacuum cleaner and washing machine and the like all have complex technology. You must work with them for a few times to learn them. But when they explain more than once, they get tired [and] get abrupt. This upsets me. They don't understand that I'm over the hill [and] need more explanation".

### **I. ii. The veneration of elderly people's presence in the family**

When children accompany elderly parents in front of others in spite of their disabilities, their parents feel delighted and their dignity is preserved. A woman, 67 years of age, said:

"My daughters run a company. They often bring their colleagues home but take me to them and introduce me with pride. I say, "I'm not coming. I've urinary incontinence; my backside might get wet suddenly. You, feel at home." But they change my clothes and take me to their guests. They don't regard my presence as below their dignity. They keep my dignity".

### **I.iii. Consideration for elderly people's interests**

The elderly wished that their interests would be taken into account and this made them feel that they were valued and had dignity. A 74-year-old man stated:

"My wife no longer cares about me; behaves stubbornly toward me; doesn't appreciate me. She used to make my fave dishes. Now, she knows I've a high blood-fat level and blood pressure but doesn't make allowances for me. She's tired".

## **II. Leisure activities**

The second main theme in the participants' experiences was leisure activities, which could help them forget problems, abandon feelings of isolation, and, ultimately, improve the mental condition. These all have profound effects on elderly people's human dignity. This Main themes consists of the following Subthemes: nature excursions, association, occupation and diversion, and social recreations.

### **II. i. Nature excursions**

Most of the elderly spend their leisure time with activities such as nature excursions, which they regard as a means of finding comfort and preserving dignity. A 68-year-old woman, with a master's degree, said:

"I do my best to travel at least once or twice a year. Being out for a few nights—when I come back, I feel I've found mental peace. It really lifts my spirits; it gives me cheerfulness and a sense of dignity".

Another elderly woman, who was 75, stated:

"Going to nature [and] seeing natural scenery, especially the green and grass, bring joy to me".

### **II. ii. Occupation and diversion**

The participants also believed that the involvement in an occupation had an influence on their dignity and, moreover, retirement led to a sense of premature aging, absurdity, and uselessness. A 67-year-old retired woman noted:

"Having no job or diversion alone, that's to say, being retired also affects my dignity because I studied for around 20 years, spent my time, went to work, enjoyed my job, am still able to work, but they retired me. I liked to work, even part-time, to keep busy".

### **II. iii. Association**

The human is a social being and needs to interact with others. In addition, scientific studies and experience have proved that such bonds have a crucial role in humans' mental health. In accordance with this, the elderly in the

present research have emphasized the important role of the association with relatives, friends, and acquaintances in order to avoid feeling isolated and maintain their own morale and dignity. A 65-year-old man stated:

“My sister and brother don’t come around much. I’m piqued that they’re not around much, [and] don’t keep my dignity. My brother sometimes calls and comes around. I’ve brought up my sister and brother from the beginning but they’re so apathetic. They don’t come around, even on festive occasions. Now it is two years that neither has been around . . . I’m upset that they don’t come around”.

#### **II. iv. Social recreations**

According to experiences from the elderly in the present research, founding social centers where the elderly could assemble and interact with like-minded people, in the same age range, would be one of the factors preserving elderly people’s dignity. A 73-year-old woman said:

“In summer, the municipality sometimes provided buses. Took [us] over and back, for example, took to Chitgar Park. Lunch was on us. They invited actors and actresses. Superb! [We] enjoyed it”.

A 65-year-old man emphasized:

“I need fun and jaunts. I’m sociable; like going on nature excursions. I think I’m idly wasting my life and time. In foreign countries, the government has programs, takes the elderly on a trip. There should also be facilities here to take the elderly together around to have fun. It influences their dignity”.

#### **III. Privacy protection**

As the third main theme in the participants’ experiences, privacy protection contributes to their mental relaxation, thereby protecting their dignity. This Main themes encompasses the following Subthemes: their personal and familial privacy, environmental privacy, and social privacy

##### **III. i. Personal and familial privacy**

Others’ intrusion on elderly people’s privacy is irritating. They cannot feel safe in such an environment and this robs them of their dignity. A 60-year-old man, who was exasperated with the grandchildren’s noise in his home, said:

“When the children come around, their kids are making noise too much. But none says anything to them. They know I’m ill [and] noise bothers me. But they don’t care less. Especially the daughters’ sons are very frustrating . . . [They] don’t make allowances for my age; never respect my dignity”.

Regarding her husband’s respect for her privacy, a 70-year-old woman emphasized:

“On Friday mornings, he attends Du’a Nudba or, Friday nights, attends Du’a Kumayl. When I’m asleep, he closes the door so gently that I don’t wake up; if I wake up, my nerves fray; I take offence”.

##### **III. ii. Environmental and social privacy**

Based on the experience gained from participants Another of the factors that impact on the interaction and dignity of the elderly is environmental and social privacy. A 74-year-old man, whose privacy was disturbed by the noise and nuisance of a neighbor’s son, said:

“A neighbor, on one of the floors, has a very mischievous son. He occasionally leaves the front door open or brings his friends to the yard, especially afternoons—[when] we’re asleep, we wake to these kids’ noise. The kid’s frustrating; is a nuisance. That’s, our dignity isn’t kept by this family, whose son’s mischievous’.

A woman, who was 75, stated:

“There’s a neighbor across from us. The couple keeps arguing with each other, screaming blue murder, fighting—out of the blue, at night—when I’m asleep at 1-2, in the middle of the night, they get on my nerves, jerk me awake; my whole body starts to shake. When there’s no fight, they turn up the TV. They never keep one’s dignity”.

A 79-year-old man, whose privacy was disturbed by a noisy living environment, emphasized:

“Now we’re in the highway plan. Many sold their homes. We’re irritated too much. The noise of cars coming and going is a nuisance. Especially when we’re asleep, noise is getting louder. One’s nerves begin to fray”.

## DISCUSSION

The themes which emerged in this study are consistent with extracted concepts in other studies. After the elderly people's experiences were interpreted, it was revealed that acceptance included being understood by the family, never regarding it as beneath the family's dignity to take the elderly to others, and children's considering of elderly people's interests. Concerning this, Tadd *et al* [20] argue that elderly people's being esteemed and accepted by others gives them dignity[20]. In accordance with this, Jakobsen and Sørli [13] in a study entitled "Dignity of Older People in a Nursing Home" concluded that others' refusal to hold the elderly in high esteem and to accept them would cause them to lose self-confidence, which might maximize the physical and mental damage to them[13]. Woolhead *et al* [21] asserted that creating a sense of acceptance in elderly people would lead to the protection of their dignity [21]. The present study too shows that the acceptance of the elderly by others creates a sense of worth and dignity in them. One of the other main themes in the participants' experiences was leisure activities, which contribute to the forgetting of problems, abandonment of isolation, and, ultimately, improvement of the mental condition, thereby influencing elderly people's human dignity tremendously. Cress [22] conducted a study on 700 people, who were 65 years old and over, and indicated that mental activities such as visiting museums provided deep mental stimulation and improved the qualitative aspect of life[22]. These findings are consistent with the findings of the present study. Due to a rapid increase in the elderly population in China, Xin [23] also indicates that it is deemed necessary to create appropriate environments in outdoor space for the elderly. Outdoor activities contribute to their health and prolong their life[23]. Abedi *et al*[24], quoting from a study by Irving *et al.*, write that a large number of people feel that life becomes dull and tedious during their initial retirement years and this feeling isolates and desolates them, the continuation of which results in illness and death[24]. Frequenting public entertainment centers and using their facilities strengthen elderly people's relationship with others and reduce their feeling of loneliness and isolation[25]. In later years, most elderly people spend their life sitting in green spaces since they have a lot of spare time at this age. However, the absence of a suitable plan and necessary facilities for elderly people's spare time might cause them to suffer remonstrance and depression[26]. Concerning this, Seshamani and Gray [27] demonstrate that retirement creates a deep interruption in people's life, detaches them from the past, and forces them to adapt to current circumstances. People who never expected to undergo such a change and did not arrange for it in preceding years now experience these circumstances with anxiety, depression, and, periodically, a sense of loss[27]. Privacy protection was the third main theme in the participants' experiences. They expected that others would value their privacy by respecting their personal and familial privacy, environmental privacy, and social privacy. This could contribute to their mental and inner peace, thereby preserving their dignity efficiently. The elderly participating in the study believed that other family members' disregard for their being in peace and quiet destroyed their dignity. In relation to this, Woolhead *et al* [22] state that factors such as respecting elderly people's privacy and conveying a sense of worth to them maintain dignity and self-worth in the elderly [22]. Cairns *et al* [28] described the meaning of dignity as treating the elderly with respect, treating them as individuals, having them get involved in decision-making, and protecting their privacy[28]. Obviously, results of other studies confirm the results of the present study. In a study entitled "Patients' Perception of Dignity in Iranian Healthcare Settings: A Qualitative Content Analysis," Ebrahimi *et al* [29] indicate that dignity includes the maintenance of respectability and privacy[29]. Undoubtedly, respect for privacy is one of the main components of holistic caregiving with the aim of satisfying one's needs. This gives the elderly dignity and builds up mutual trust so that a safe environment leads them to mental and physical health. It must also be remembered that everybody's private sphere is different[6, 30]. Quoting Murphy, Anderberg *et al* [11] writes that elderly people strive to create privacy by developing a home-like atmosphere and improving the personal everyday lifestyle[11].

## CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that it appears necessary to provide conditions required for the maintenance of elderly people's familial and social interactions in order to bolster their morale and preserve their human dignity. Moreover, elderly people's clinic nurses and in-home caregivers should organize and conduct their care programs on the basis of sympathetic interactions while protecting elderly clients' dignity. Ultimately, one of the most practical approaches to holding patients in reverence is to abide by the Charter of Rights for the Elderly. Given the cultural diversity in the society, the present research could also be conducted in other parts of Iran so as to achieve better results.

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