

# How do Iranian Elderly People Conceptualize Social Welfare? A Content Analysis Study

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## Abstract

The sharp increase in life expectancy and the growing number of elderly people mean that more attention needs to be paid to their welfare. However, only a few studies have been done on the welfare of elderly people in Iran. This study examines the concept of social welfare from their perspective. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 20 elderly people and the results were analysed through content analysis. Two categories of concepts -material and non-material, were extracted. Material concepts include the sub-categories 'economic situation, housing, physical access to outdoor space, health, leisure facilities,

and social support' while non-material concepts include the subcategories of "emotions" and "relationships". The results of this study reveal multi-dimensional concepts which can also be used to develop welfare indicators for the Iranian elderly.

**Key words:** Elderly, Social welfare, Qualitative research, Iran

## Introduction

The past century has witnessed a significant increase in life expectancy. The number of elderly people around the world is increasing; this increase has changed the population structure.

Soon there will be more elderly people than children. Over the next few years, for the first time in human history, the number of people 65 years and older will be equal to the number of children under five. By 2050, their number will be greater than the number of children under 14 years (WHO, 2012). The elderly population in the country has grown substantially, from 5.3% in 1966 to 8.2% in 2011; it has now reached the number of 6.2 million. It is predicted that in the next 30 years, the share of the population aged over 65 years will be around 18–20% (i.e. almost one in five people will be elderly (UNFPA, 2012).

The aging phenomenon has far-reaching effects on the social and economic aspects of the communities and influences the social welfare of the elderly as well (Galassoa & Profetab, June 2007). In other words, the increasing number of elderly people in recent years has led to an increase in social needs, such as need for healthcare, in many countries (Thorslund & Parker, 1995). For this reason, some governments have devoted more attention to this phenomenon and have made changes in their economic systems (Bengtsson & Scott, 2009). It should be noted that measurement, planning, and verification of the details of examination of the concept of well-being, while the evidence shows that there is no single definition of this concept.

The notion arising from some definitions includes only economic and physical aspects of well-being, while some of the other definitions touch upon non-financial and non-material concepts as well (Greve, 2008). Social welfare can be examined at the individual or the social level. Individual well-being pays attention to the micro-level and social welfare makes up the macro-level well-being of the whole society. So far, there have been several different views towards social welfare. For Bentham, social welfare means maximum satisfaction and happiness (Masur, 2010), while Pigou pays more attention to the financial issues and argues that well-being is a concept associated with dreams and desires that can be measured monetarily (Mohaqeqi Kamal, Rafiey, Sajjadi, Abassian, & Rahgozar, 2014). John Rawls touches upon the field of justice and morality. For Rawls, a society with equitable distribution of resources has a better welfare situation than a society in which resources are not fairly distributed (Pigou, 2013).

While these concepts are often objective, Easterlin refers to their close association with subjective concepts such as satisfaction and happiness, which are beyond material concepts. Therefore, the numerous given definitions of well-being are not similar (Easterlin, 2001a).

Dolgoff, in his definition of welfare, says that 'social welfare includes those non-profit functions of society, public or voluntary, which are clearly aimed at alleviating

distress and poverty or at ameliorating the conditions of the casualties of society' (Dolgoff & Feldstein, 1980). In a broader definition of a person's social welfare, in addition to health, Fitzpatrick includes education, security, housing, money, and resources, as well as relative well-being in comparison to others (Fitzpatrick, 2011).

In this context, the United Nations has provided the following definition: 'Social welfare as an organized function is regarded as a body of activities designed to enable individuals, families, groups, and communities to cope with the social problems of changing conditions. But in addition to and extending beyond the range of its responsibilities for specific services, social welfare has a further function within the broad area of a country's social development' (Casimir & Samuel, 2015).

At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that these concepts can change, depending on the expectations and aspirations of the individuals in the courses of their lives (Easterlin, 2001b). On the other hand, it should be noted that elderly people have their own special needs and expectations. Thus, they may have different views and expectations with regard to social welfare than others, i.e. the definition of social welfare may be different for them (Sarkisian, Hays, & Mangione, 2002) and it also is important to compare these differences in various cultures (Greve, 2008).

In Iran, very few studies have been conducted on the various aspects of elderly people (Tajvar, Arab, & Montazeri, 2008). Among them, one can refer to the study by Mohagheghi et al. on social welfare, which indicates that social welfare in Iran has six dimensions or categories, namely employment, social security, economy, education, health, and housing allocation (Mohaqeqi Kamal et al., 2014). This study was designed for the general population rather than only the elderly. Another study by Hezarjaribi in Tehran on the sense of well-being in people aged 15–65 years shows that the variables of 'confidence in the performance of officials, religiosity, socio-economic status of individuals, and a sense of social justice' have a direct positive impact on the welfare of the people, while variables such as social alienation and fatalism have a negative effect (Hezarjaribi & ShaliReza, 2012).

In summary, it can be concluded that there is no single definition or consensus on social welfare (Fitzpatrick, 2011); rather, different socio-economic, political, and cultural interpretations exist. Although the definition of social welfare can also depend on the intellectual and cultural backgrounds of individuals, many of the presented concepts are objective and primarily consider the economic and financial problems (Greve, 2008). In light of the multidimensional concept of welfare and its dependence on cultural and age conditions and the lack of proper studies in this field, this study, a qualitative content analysis approach to the concept of social welfare in the view of the elderly, has been undertaken.

## Methods

In the course of this study, from April to October 2015, the views of elderly people on the issue of social welfare for the elderly were collected and studied through the inductive content analysis approach.

### Participants:

In this method, the qualitative data was obtained from interviews. A purposive maximum variation sampling was chosen, so that people from diverse economic, social, family, and educational backgrounds could participate. Participants from three geographic regions, northern, central, and southern Tehran were selected and the level of education varied from illiteracy to PhD (Table 1).

Inclusion criteria were being older than 60 and having cognition, while lack of cognition and unwillingness to participate in the study were the exclusion criteria.

The number of interviews were not pre-specified; interviews were conducted until data saturation. Ultimately, 10 women and 10 men participated in the study.

### Interviews:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, with key questions designed by the academic board members. Interviews were conducted by three interviewers. Based on the well-designed interview guide, various dimensions of welfare were investigated. The main questions were: 'What is the purpose of social welfare and what are its different aspects? Which of these aspects have more importance?'

Before starting the study, each interviewer did an interview for a pilot study and the results were controlled in a meeting with supervisors. Each interview lasted for 40–60 minutes.

### Analysis:

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Afterwards, each interview was analysed through the inductive content analysis method, which involves reading the transcript a number of times to make sense of the data, identifying the meaning units and open coding, sorting codes into the subcategories and core categories, and describing the concepts that already have been defined (Elo & Kyngas,

2008). According to the classification made, the texts were reviewed many times. Interviews continued until the point of data saturation.

### Rigour:

During the study, researchers had 'prolonged involvement' with the data. Interviewers had useful prior experience through in-depth interviews with the elderly. Regular debriefing sessions were held between researchers and supervisors. Each encoding was checked by two other interviewers, and also used the iterative questioning approach. The results were submitted to an expert panel consisting of four professors specializing in the field of social welfare. A researcher from outside the project acted as a referee to control and evaluate the findings. The results were compared with other similar studies. Finally, in member checking, the participants agreed that the extracted concepts expressed their views about the welfare of the elderly.

### Ethical considerations

This study was approved by the University of Welfare and Rehabilitation Sciences, with registration number 801/93/8656/1. While taking consent from the respondents, explanations about the purpose of the investigation were given to them by the interviewer and they were informed that they can refuse to participate in the study at any time they wish. All reports were prepared anonymously and the specifications that could lead to identification of individuals have been concealed.

## Results

The results of data analysis, obtained via in-depth interviews with the elderly to explain their opinions on their social welfare, are divided into two categories and eight subcategories. Based on the findings of this study, there are two main categories: material and non-material concepts.

### Material concepts

The material concepts of the results of the present research are split into six subcategories: appropriate economic situation, suitable housing, physical access to outdoor space, physical health, leisure facilities, and social support.

**Table 1: Sex, Age and Education of Participants**

| No | Sex    | Age | Education         | No | Sex    | Age | Education         |
|----|--------|-----|-------------------|----|--------|-----|-------------------|
| 1  | Female | 80  | Elementary School | 11 | Female | 63  | Elementary School |
| 2  | Female | 62  | Master Degree     | 12 | Female | 62  | High School       |
| 3  | Male   | 74  | Secondary School  | 13 | Female | 75  | Master Degree     |
| 4  | Male   | 63  | Secondary School  | 14 | Male   | 76  | PhD               |
| 5  | Female | 60  | Secondary School  | 15 | Male   | 71  | Doctorate         |
| 6  | Male   | 73  | Master Degree     | 16 | Female | 61  | High School       |
| 7  | Male   | 65  | High School       | 17 | Male   | 61  | High School       |
| 8  | Male   | 78  | Elementary School | 18 | Female | 62  | High School       |
| 9  | Female | 63  | Master Degree     | 19 | Female | 62  | Illiterate        |
| 10 | Male   | 64  | Bachelor Degree   | 20 | Male   | 61  | Master Degree     |



### **Economic situation**

The elderly participants of this research considered appropriate economic situation as one of the important factors of welfare, and its absence as an effective factor reducing the welfare. *'Financial ability is the first word in the life of an elderly person'*, said a 62-year old lady on the importance of this matter. An appropriate economic situation requires sufficient income. *'Welfare means the income you should earn to spend; otherwise, you always have to beg from others'*, continued the same participant on the role of the aforementioned factor in well-being. Receiving sufficient pension is another economically significant matter for the elderly. *'Low pension makes living difficult for the elderly'*, said a 75-year old woman about the pension. In a number of the conducted interviews, the economic situation was mentioned as a basis for the other dimensions of welfare. *'Economic situation is like a chain that connects different aspects of life to each other; no money entails no good food, no sleeping, no housing, and no physical and mental health; that is why it is said that money talks'*, said a 63-year old woman.

### **Suitable housing**

The elderly participants in this survey highlighted housing as a main component of social welfare. The results of the study demonstrate that owning a house is a key factor in this connection, a rented house does not resolve the relevant concerns. *'It is my right to own a house'*, said a 62-year old widow who lives in a nursing home.

Enjoying peace and quiet at home is another aspect. *'Home must be a quiet place to rest with no annoying noises'*, maintained a 63-year old man in this regard.

Making the house physically suitable is very important for the elderly. The elderly participants expressed that they expect their home to be arranged in a way that they could live without problems, such as climbing stairs. They expect to live in a house where the design is convenient. A 76-year old man elaborated on this: *'The equipment inside the house, including cooking equipment, heating devices, etc., is expected to be easily usable for the elderly without much physical effort.'*

Another man of 74 said about the physical features of houses for the elderly: *'The house is expected to have good lighting and no slipperiness in the bedrooms, bathrooms, and kitchen. An elderly person lives with less sense and energy. An unsafe house increases the risk of injury for such a person.'*

### **Easy physical access to outdoor spaces**

The elderly participants of the current study considered easy physical access as an important factor influencing their social welfare. This subcategory has different dimensions, such as suitable public transport system, improvement in public places, and easy access to urban pathways like sidewalks. *'There can be no well-being if an elderly person cannot go out and walk on the sidewalks'*, said a 61-year old man on the relationship between urban access and the social welfare of the elderly.

### **Physical health**

The interviews conducted with the elderly revealed that they do not expect to have a completely healthy status with no illness; rather, they expect to enjoy sufficient health to meet their daily needs.

*'For an elderly person, it is important to avoid disease and disability so that s/he can meet her/his needs without help from anyone else'*, a 74-year old man pointed out.

On the other hand, the elderly people are in need of easy access to treatment facilities in case of illness. They also pointed out the importance of having access to healthcare services in the event of disease or disability:

*'Physical health is highly important because I need the help of others during illness. Nobody is there to care for me'*, a 63-year old man said.

Proper nutrition is another significant factor affecting the health of the elderly. The participants remarked that, with age, their diets change and there are many things that they can no longer eat. *'We cannot eat as before; we suffer from hypertension and we cannot digest fat'*, a 74-year old man said. A factor that was reported to be fundamental to the health and social welfare of the elderly was access to health information. *'It would be very helpful if I am given some information on my health and how I should take care of myself and treat my health problems'*, said a 65-year old man in this connection.

### **Leisure facilities**

In social welfare, the elderly people emphasized the importance of leisure. They said that they have more free time and need to have access to leisure facilities that are suitable for the elderly. *'It is possible to offer tourism services, group tours, exhibitions, poetry nights, and fiction events'*, a 75-year old man expressed. Although some of these activities can be done individually, such as reading or walking in the open air, the results of the study unveiled that elderly people are very interested in gathering with other senior citizens. A 61-year old man maintained in this connection: *'If they gather together in a park, neighbourhood municipal complex, or any place arranged by the municipal services, you can see them sitting together for five to six hours a day.'*

### **Social support**

The participants of this study believe that they are in need of social services and hence their needs must be covered by some organization. A 64-year old man said on the role of government and volunteers in founding such an organization: *'If we could establish an organization of volunteers and philanthropists within a state-budgeted structure, this could enable the elderly to meet their needs and increase their welfare by reducing the problems.'* A 65-year old retired woman elaborated on social support: *'Elderly people expect to have at least a small house, insurance, and social security services, and of course these services should be available and easy to access.'* Another component of social support is insurance. In

the elderly people's views, a good insurance is one that covers medical expenses and is tailor-made to the client's requirements, so that an elderly person faces no trouble at the time of diseases and problems. *'For elderly people, there must be a good and efficient insurance coverage for medical expenses, to relieve material and living-related concerns'*, replied a 61-year old woman in an interview.

### Non-material concepts

The non-material concepts are divided into two subcategories "emotions" and "relationships".

#### Emotions

Not all elderly welfare-associated factors are material, but emotions are also important for the elderly. Emotions comprise a wide range of expressed welfare-related feelings. One such emotional need is avoiding loneliness and having a companion. According to the findings, elderly people avoid loneliness and feel that it hampers their welfare. They consider it as a serious challenge and believe that having a companion could protect them from loneliness. *'The elderly need to be taken care of, in terms of both material and spiritual dimensions; feeling lonely is a very difficult experience at this point in life'*, said a 60-year old woman.

The expressed views of the elderly represent the significance of mental health to them. They expect to experience this feeling in their old age. *'An elderly person needs to be free from mental concerns. The more the distress, the more illness s/he would suffer from. In other words, mental disorders entail physical illness'*, said a 60-year old woman in this connection. *'Well-being means independence, a feeling of satisfaction, and a good mood in spirit'*, answered a 71-year old participant. Feeling individually independent is preferred among the elderly participants. The elderly people prefer to make their life decisions on their own, and want to avoid feeling disempowered in this. An elderly person who used to live in a nursing home objected to the lack of individual independence, saying: *'I would feel better if I were independent and outside of here.'* The elderly people under study felt satisfied being part of a family and believed it to be worthwhile. *'The relatives meet our spiritual needs well and it is valuable to be in touch with family members'*, said a 75-year old man

#### Relationships

The elderly participants of the present study described convenient family and social relationships as another dimension of their well-being. They said that they are interested in social presence and participation. One of the participants elaborated on social participation: *'An elderly person is willing to take active part in different issues. S/he hates feeling unnoticed and expects others to use her/his experiences. S/he needs a place where the elderly people can get together and take part in matters at hand.'* They said that they expect others, within the family and social relationships, to give them social dignity and respect them without discrimination. *'Elderly people socially expect others to respect their rights and treat them like other people with no discrimination'*, said a 63-year old man in this connection. In particular, enjoying warm and lovely

relationships with others, especially with family members, makes the elderly feel supported; this affection is soothing and contributes to their mental health improvement. In line with this, a man of 65 who lives in a nursing home said: *'It is very important for me to be in touch with my family members; I have access to a telephone here and feel happy when they call me up.'* The absence of this type of communication and affection from others may cause them trauma. *'When an elderly person does not receive affection and love from others, it makes him/her sick physically and mentally'*, said a 61-year old man.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The present study attempts to investigate the views of elderly people on social welfare via in-depth interviews and the content analysis method. The obtained results reveal that the concept of social welfare among the elderly has different dimensions, including material and non-material aspects. 'Financial ability' and 'sufficient pension' are important material subcategories and are considered to affect the well-being of the elderly. These subcategories, according to the participants, may considerably affect other dimensions of social welfare. In spite of the importance of economic dimensions for the elderly, their social well-being is not restricted solely to material aspects. According to the findings of the current research, positive emotions, mental health, and warm family and social relationships are key to achieving an appropriate level of social welfare.

Not many qualitative studies have been carried out on the concept of welfare in the view of elderly people; however, the results obtained in this research are comparable to a number of relevant proposed definitions. According to Saxena, social welfare consists of efforts made by governments and voluntary organizations to help families. Such attempts include generation of income and maintaining it at a reasonable level, providing medical care and public healthcare services, providing housing, providing access to social development, paving the way for ease of social adjustment, and providing recreational facilities (Saxena, 2006). These points are very consistent with what has been expressed by the elderly participants of this study. The presented non-material concepts related to the social welfare of the elderly are consistent with the subjective concepts set forth by Easterlin, including happiness (Easterlin, 2001a). Some of the results of this study, such as need for care and sufficient pension, are directly associated with aging, implying that social welfare-related concepts may change during the lifetime, depending on the age. Apart from the importance of economic dimensions for the elderly, they mentioned other factors such as social and emotional relationships in their remarks, revealing that their social well-being is not restricted to material aspects. Thus, contrary to what Pigou suggested (Pigou, 2013), their social welfare may not be measurable solely by monetary standards.

The elderly participants of this study also pointed out the role of mental and social health and support in their social welfare. These results are consistent with those of research by Alipour et al. on 100 Tehran-based elderly

people (Alipoor, Sajadi, Forozan, & Biglarian, 2009).

In an investigation by Teymouri et al. on the welfare conditions of the Iranian elderly, three dimensions of physical health, mental health, and social health were considered significant for the social welfare of elderly people (Teymouri, Dadkhah, & Shirazikhah, 2006). These three dimensions are significant in this study as well.

Mohagheghi et al., in research on the non-elderly population of Iran, identified social security, economy, education, health, and housing as the important dimensions of welfare in Iran (Mohaqeqi Kamal et al., 2014), out of which the economic situation, health, housing, and social support are investigated and discussed in the present study as well. The need for health-related education is examined in the findings of this research; however, it has not been considered as an independent factor of social welfare by the elderly participants. Social and emotional relationships, identified in the results of this study, are not reported in the said research of Mohagheghi, possibly due to the age difference in the populations considered in the two studies. It may be concluded that with aging, people feel more need for social and emotional relationships. To investigate this more deeply and accurately, further studies are needed, using grounded theory approach for example.

In conclusion, the present study maintains that the welfare of the elderly is a multi-dimensional concept which comprises both material aspects, such as financial ability, and non-material aspects, such as positive feelings. The results of this study may contribute to further elaboration of the indicators of social welfare among the elderly.

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