How Do I Fulfill My Nutrition: The Experience of Older Adults Who Live Alone

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ABSTRACT

The barriers to living alone get bigger when older adults get older. One of them is being unable to fulfill their nutritional needs. Older adults who live alone must be able to fulfill nutritional needs, personal hygiene and health independently. This research was conducted to describe experience of older adults who live alone to fulfill their nutritional needs in Magetan, East Java. The methodology employed was a phenomenological qualitative design. We conducted in-depth interviews with seven older adults who live alone. The data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. Six themes emerged as the strategy to get ingredient and food were cooked by self, bought from the seller, collected from farm; the barriers to fulfilling nutritional needs were getting old, disease and financial insufficiency. To fulfill the nutritional needs is a challenge for older adults, especially when they get sick. So, they need support from family, neighbors, and government to overcome the barrier. It is expected to be a consideration in policies regarding monitoring programs of the condition of older adults who live alone.

Keywords: nutritional need, food, barriers, live alone, older adults

Introduction

The older adults enjoy their old days with their family, but, in certain circumstances and for certain reasons, they decide to live alone. An older adult who lives alone must fulfill their nutritional needs independently. Based on a study in Indonesia, intake of malnutrition was more common in older adult aged 70 years who lived alone. In addition, the incidence of malnutrition is quite high in older adults in rural areas because the diet is unsuitable to the needs.

The decision of older adults to live alone can come from themselves or because the family does not want to take care of them. Factors that affect older adults in living alone are cultural factors, family background, and personality. Indonesian cultures adheres to a social system that is collective in nature and most still adhere to the extended family system, which is one house consists of several nuclear families including grandparents. So, it is common for an older adult to live with their family. Conflict in the family can also be a reason for older adults to live alone. In addition, there are older adults who want to be independent, actively establish communication with their neighbors, be free to do activities, and do not want to burden their families. However, there are consequences of problems that can affect older adults who choose to live alone, such as the problem of meeting adequate nutritional needs.

Research on older adults who living alone has been done, but there has been no in-depth research on the experience of older adults who live alone in fulfilling nutritional needs. As such, the researchers are interested in using qualitative research methods with phenomenological designs to explore the barrier to fulfill nutrition for the elderly who live alone in Magetan, Indonesia.

Method

Study Design, Participants and Sampling: This study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. This approach allowed the researcher to probe the barriers experienced by the older adults when fulfilling their nutritional needs. The researcher selected...
the participants through purposive sampling among the older adults who live alone in Magetan, East Java, Indonesia. Snowball sampling was used in this research. Older adults who were known by the researcher were approached. Then, they recommended others older adults as potential participants. The inclusion criteria were: 1) lived alone without family or partners, 2) had good cognitive function (Short Portable Mental Status Questionnaire score within 0-2), 3) able to read and write and 4) agree to share and speak about their experiences. The recruitment was discontinued when the data saturation was determined by the seventh participant.

**Procedure:** The interviews were scheduled at the participants’ homes at a convenient date and time, involving both the older adults and the researcher. After an explanation about the research process and giving signed consent, the participants were asked demographic questions and screened for nutritional status with Mini Nutritional Assessment (MNA). Then, an in-depth interview with older adults using four open-ended questions (with additional questions if necessary) was conducted to explore the experience of older adults to fulfill their nutritional needs. The interview process was 15 – 45 minutes and recorded.

**Measures:** A series of open-ended questions for the older adults was developed to let the participants tell their experience when fulfilling their nutritional needs. The interview questions were designed based on previous research on fulfilling nutritional needs for older adults. In addition, the empirical knowledge of the writer about the older adults and their nutritional needs was used when creating the questions. A demographic questionnaire (created by the author) was used to obtain basic demographic information (e.g. gender, occupation, income, age, education, etc.). The following questions were conducted during interviews: “What do you think about fulfilling nutritional needs?” “Please tell me how was your experience when fulfilling nutritional needs while living alone?” “What were the barriers that you encountered when fulfilling nutritional needs while living alone?”

**Data Analysis:** The data were analyzed and interpreted using the Colaizzi method. This method allows data to be clarified with participants, as well as possible changes in the results. A summary of the process of data analysis is as follows. Step 1: describe the phenomenon of study. The researchers increased the knowledge of “the older adults who lived alone and how they fulfill nutritional needs” through reading research articles and books. Step 2: collect the phenomenon through the participants’ opinions verbatim. Step 3: read the whole phenomenon collected from the participants. The verbatim script was synchronized between the sound recording and field notes. Step 4: sort the significant statements. The researcher coded the participant statements that had a significant meaning as listed verbatim. Step 5: formulate the meaning of each significant statement. The researchers fully used the participants’ point of view and put aside all assumptions of the researcher. Step 6: categorize each unit of meaning into a theme. Step 7: integrate each theme into a complete description. Step 8: validate the results of the analysis with the participants. We allowed the participant to read the verbatim transcript and validate the meaning. Step 9: refine the analysis results with the data obtained during the validation process.

The author involved two colleagues for an external finding validation, discussed the different perspectives, and clarified any “bias of researchers” that may have influenced the process of data interpretation. In addition, to minimize the researcher bias, the researchers wrote a reflective diary. The reflective diary was used to write down the author’s thoughts, feelings, and perceptions about “fulfilling nutritional need for older adult” when conducting the research. This allowed the researchers to re-examine their position when problems arose.

**Results**

A summary table of the characteristic of participants is included in Table 1. All participants were older adult females who lived alone.

**Table 1: The characteristic of the older adults**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Categorized</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Mean of Age (years)</td>
<td>63.57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less than junior high school</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>85.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Completed junior high school</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Farmer</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>28.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Laborer</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>57.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Income/month (Rupiahs)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>500.000 – 1,5 millions</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The summarized themes are presented in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Subthemes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>The strategy to get ingredients and food</td>
<td>Bought ingredients and food from the seller.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collected from farm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Cooked by self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The barriers to fulfilling the nutritional needs</td>
<td>Getting older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Financial insufficiency</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The strategy to get ingredients and food: We deduced that there were three subthemes to get ingredients and food, such as bought from the seller, collected from farm and cooked by self. The “bought from the seller” subtheme was described by participants:

“...Sometimes I buy chicken or vegetables at the market, then ask someone to cook, a half kg of chicken can be two days, really. If I’m not feeling well, I buy food at a warung (food stand) near my house. “(Participant 2/P2)

“...Everything what I want to eat, I just buy, such as meatballs, tepo pecel (a kind of food), nasi campur (a kind of food).” (P3)

The second subthemes “cooked food by self” was described by participants:

“I buy the seasonings, tofu, tempe (a kind of food made from fermented soybean) and vegetables in a shop near my house, Miss. I rarely buy food. I cook by myself, the taste is more suitable.”(P5)

“I cook every day, Miss, I never bought it. I save more money if I cook by myself.” (P1)

The third subtheme “collect from farm” was described by participants:

“... the sweet potatoes are my own, I take them from the backyard garden. I usually collect pumpkins in the fields ...” (P4)

“I take the vegetables and fruit from the garden, for example papaya leaves or young papaya, there is also spinach, long bean leaves, I take all of the vegetables from the garden. In my backyard garden, there is also papaya, mango, banana, the banana on the table is also from the garden. I planted it myself, Miss.” (P6)

The barriers to fulfilling the nutritional needs: We conclude three subthemes as barriers in fulfilling the nutritional needs, such as getting older, disease and financial insufficiency. The first subtheme, “getting older”, was described by participants:

“Becoming older like me, it means health starts to decline. I have difficulty to fall sleep, even eating is hard for me. Doing everything is difficult.” (P3)

“I can’t eat, most of the food is hard to chew. I do not have teeth anymore, only two teeth (pointing to the teeth. So I mean I have to choose soft ones like tofu or vegetable like chayote” (P5)

The second barrier to fulfilling the nutritional needs is “disease” as described by participants:

“The difficulty is that, if uric acid is recurring, my left and right knee is rheumatic, the fingers also get sore. I can’t take water from the well. It is difficult for me. Moreover, if I have to cook or go to market, I can’t handle it. So I just buy food in the food stall in near my house.” (P2)

The third barrier to fulfilling the nutritional needs is “financial insufficiency” as described by participants:

“... I eat whatever that is available, Miss, if I don’t have money, I eat two times per day or I fast on Monday and Thursday. Not bad, I can save my money. Understandably, I don’t have money, usually my child gives me money, not too much is given. Or income from selling vegetables in the garden.”(P6)
Discussion

Cooking is an activity to convert raw food ingredients into foods that are ready to eat, have quality, and are safe for consumption. The purpose of processing food ingredients is to reduce the risk of losing nutrients in food ingredients, increase digestibility, and maintain color, taste, tenderness, appearance of food, and being free from organisms or harmful substances to the body. This is supported by other study maintaining the cleanliness of food or drinks in the daily processes food by cooking it yourself and maintaining food quality more. The process of providing food starts with attention to the food ingredients to be chosen. Food ingredients need to be considered and selected as well as possible in terms of cleanliness, appearance, and health. Choosing materials that will be processed must involve knowing good food sources and paying attention to the characteristics of good food ingredients. The results of interview were obtained by processing food by other people. The older someone is can cause various disorders in fulfilling their daily needs, so can increase dependence on others. Declining physical abilities can affect older adults in cooking and preparing food.

The influence of the aging process can cause various problems, both physically, biologically, mentally, and socioeconomically. Older people will experience setbacks, especially in the field of physical ability. In addition, Maryam et al. (2011) explained tooth decay (toothlessness) will reduce the ability to digest food. In old age, permanent teeth become dry, more brittle, darker in color, and even some teeth have been dated.

The challenge to live alone is greater as people grow older. There are barriers to fulfilling daily needs, such as eating, bathing, etc. According to Maslow, older adults who live alone may be malnourished and lose weight because they cannot afford enough food, also they are too weak to prepare three meals per day. Some older people have no appetite because they are sick or lonely, and unable to get food regularly. In addition, there is a decrease in digestive function, depression, changes in economic condition, lack of knowledge about nutrition, physical inability, such as difficulty shopping and cooking, all of which may become a problem in fulfilling nutrition in older adults.

According to Miller (2012), depression and other cognitive decline can affect diet and ability to prepare food. There is a strong relationship between nutrition and low income. The decline of physical condition of older adults would cause a decline in the economic field. Economically, people who are more than 60 years old are no longer productive. Declining work ability means amount of income also decreases or even disappears altogether. This condition causes older adults to be often seen as a burden rather than as a resource.

Limitation of this study is that this research could not be generalized to a larger population because a different phenomenon might occur. However, this study is very important for the development of knowledge in fulfilling nutritional needs in older adults. This research can be used as a platform for policy makers, especially in Indonesia, to improve health services for older adults in the community.

Conclusion

The obstacles of older adults who live alone in fulfilling their dietary needs are old age, illness, and economic inadequacy. These obstacles must be overcome by involving cooperation from government, health workers and community. Community involvement in fulfilling nutritional needs of older adults is needed in the form of special attention and supervision by cadres in the older adult who lives alone. Health workers at the Puskesmas (Health Center Service) need to make home visits for older adults living alone. This activity will help to find out the nutritional status of the older adult, in addition to the regular program from the Posyandu (Self Health Service) for older adults. There needs to be real support from family members in the form of material and non-material assistance to support the needs of the older adult who lives alone.

Ethical Clearance: Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing Universitas Airlangga gave Ethical Approval for this research with the number 929-KEPK before recruitment. Each participant was voluntary, proved by signing an informed consent, and gave a pseudonym.

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Conflict of Interest: None
REFERENCES


