

Original Article

Understanding the Social Production of Spaces Among Older Persons Living Alone in Labo, Camarines Norte

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Abstract. Rising incidents of independent living among the elderly in the Philippines were a direct consequence of an aging population. However, age-friendly environment initiatives were challenged by the diversity of experiences of those elderly living independently, suggesting that understanding of these local experiences was imperative for a successful program. This study explored and contextualized Henri Lefebvre's three social dimensions of spaces among fifteen older persons living alone using a qualitative case study design. Data from participants' in-depth (with photo-elicitation technique) and key informant interviews were analyzed using a three-level coding thematic analysis. Themes that emerged indicated that perceived spaces have become spaces for survival. Evident in this were the various survival practices in their single-room living space, as well as their engagement in backyard industries, active use of private outdoor spaces, and passive use of public outdoor spaces. On the other hand, their lived spaces were known to be shaped by economic underprivilege brought about by factors such as their strained relationship with family members, their chronic health condition, and the inadequacy of social pension. This is further seen in the connectivity and sentimentality attached to their living space. Relational embeddedness manifests in mutual help. Conceived spaces were shaped by the mismatch between institutional priorities and lived needs. This is reflected in themes such as the government's lack of financial support for those living independently and its prioritization of accessibility and entertainment. Furthermore, the absence of a proper assessment tool resulted in unreported incidents of elderly abandonment and abuse. The study's results highlighted the tension among the three social dimensions of spaces, emphasizing the need for inclusive programs that address the unique situation of the elderly who live independently.

Keywords: *Aging in place; Lefebvre; Living arrangements; Older persons living alone; Social dimension of spaces.*

Population ageing, along with rapid urbanization, is considered one of the most significant social transformations of the 21st century, a reality that will shape human history. It is a global trend that is affecting the world. In 2022, the Asia-Pacific region alone comprised 61% of the world's older population. By 2050, it is expected that 26% of the Asia-Pacific region will be comprised of older persons, 1.3 billion people (ESCAP, 2022a). In the Philippines, the older population is projected to account for 10.25% of the total

population by 2025. This is due to the country's declining replacement level, from 2.7 in 2017 to 1.9 in 2022 (Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and ICF, 2023). In a biological sense, aging results from molecular and cellular damage over time, leading to a decrease in an individual's physical and mental capacities. However, beyond these biological aspects, aging is also associated with life transitions, and physical and social environments can influence the aging process. In 2022, the United Nations (UN) General Assembly declared 2021-2030 as the Decade of Healthy Ageing which aims to create a global collaboration to foster longer and healthier lives.

The Philippine constitution (Article XV, Section 4) states that *"the family has the duty to care for its elderly members, but the State may also do so through just programs of social security"*. However, this rapid population change directly affects the welfare of the Filipino elderly. Financial security, health care services, an age-friendly environment, and family support were among the unmet needs of Filipino elderly (Carandang et al., 2019a). This is further supported by the study conducted by HelpAge International and Coalition of Services for the Elderly (COSE), which revealed that 57 % of the elderly had difficulty accessing food, while 52 % reported they had difficulty accessing medicines, mainly because of the lack of financial resources to buy high-quality food with nutritional value and medicines (Aquino, 2023). It can be argued that these unmet needs and difficulties were a direct result of the changes in the dynamics of living arrangements among the older population. Studies confirmed that living arrangements were a critical determinant of well-being among the older population. Teerawichitchainan et al. (2015) suggested that elderly people in Asia living alone faced difficult challenges due to factors such as gender, socioeconomic status, and social networks.

In 2019, the United Nations-Population Division report on the living arrangements of older persons in the Philippines revealed that 55.8 % were living with their extended family, 18.8 % lives with their spouse and children, 13.4 % lives with their spouse, 8.4 % lives alone, and 3.5 % represents those in home care facilities and other kinds of living arrangements (ESCAP, 2022). This directly mirrors the reality of the older population in the Philippines, where the discourse on aging predominantly focuses on living arrangements (Cruz, 2025). Evident in this was the overwhelming preference for independent living among Filipino elderly, with older males and the younger cohort of older persons showing the greatest desire for independent living. Others want to live alone but near a child; this is because older persons in this cohort might still have younger, unmarried children (Cruz et al., 2025). In a study conducted by Loa et al (2023), findings revealed that for Filipinos who are independently living, physical health, maintenance of mental capacity, social relationships with others, financial stability, and spirituality were aspects of living that they considered important.

Ageing, as a biological process, gradually reduces an individual's capacity for physical activity, thereby limiting their interaction with their immediate surroundings. Thus, the need to create a livable environment that is inclusive to all ages is of utmost importance. Ageing in Place is a concept that is built on environmental and geographical gerontology, stressing the independence and self-sufficiency of living conditions among older persons without having to move in old age (ESCAP, 2022). However, promoting this concept to address global aging proved challenging. Aging in place and its policies were often criticized on the assumption that they mainly cater to those who are healthy and wealthy, putting older people who lack resources and have limited living arrangement options on the periphery of discussion. The recognition of social and cultural diversity in policies was also put into action, as it is rarely put into practice (Buffet & Phillipson, 2024). These gaps emphasized the need for understanding the diverse lived experiences of the elderly, with reference to their social space.

Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) believed that human beings mobilize spatial elements, including resources, rationally so that they may form a sequence of actions to attain a certain objective. He believed that humans not only produce social relations but simultaneously produce social space (Fusch, 2019). For Lefebvre, place is a product of the dynamics between the three social dimensions of spaces, namely: (a) spatial practice (perceived spaces), (b) representational space (lived spaces), and (c) representations of spaces (conceived spaces). Perceived space refers to how human beings encounter and use space; lived space was more subjective, rich with emotions and meanings; hence, these two dimensions of space were closely related. The third dimension, conceived spaces, are the conceptualizations made by urban planners, scientists, and other experts, manifested in urban planning designs, government policies, etc. (Moulaert et al, 2018). Lefebvre's theory highlights the capacity of humans to produce social spaces; space then is not merely a thing but a product and a social reality. It is in this sense that Lefebvre's theory was used to explore and contextualize the situations of older persons living alone,

as it provided a framework for how each of these social dimensions of spaces shaped the participants' reality.

This is achieved by contextualizing the three social dimensions of spaces identified by Lefebvre, as they are understood and experienced by the participants. Guided by Lefebvre's theory, the research questions aimed to contextualize the following: (a) Perceived spaces (represented by the physical aspect of spaces and how the participants experience them), (b) Lived spaces (represented by daily experiences), and (c) Conceived spaces (represented by the government's programs and policies for the elderly). Figure 1 is the visual representation of Lefebvre's social dimensions of spaces.

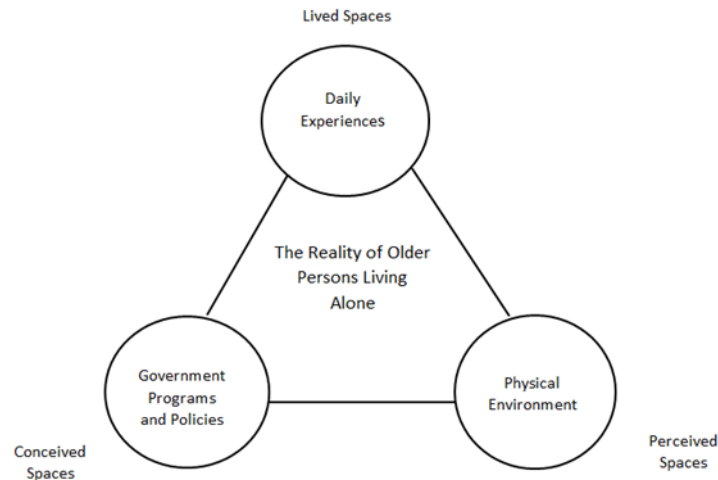


Figure 1. *The Three Social Dimensions of Spaces*

Lefebvre conceptualizes this theory not merely as occupying spaces, but as “taking it for oneself and making it one’s own”, a notion that may help further the understanding of the space that frames the unique social condition of older persons living alone. By contextualizing these understandings, this paper aimed to further the importance of spatial justice in developing age-friendly environments for older persons living alone and their distinct situation.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed an explorative qualitative case study research design. Case study as a qualitative analysis has a specific way of collecting, organizing, and analyzing data that can be considered an analysis process in itself (Paton, 2022). As a research approach, the goal of case studies is of theoretical generalization (Chowdhury & Shil, 2021). In this sense, the single case study method was employed to capture the collective experiences of older persons living alone in Labo, Camarines Norte. Thus, the “case” in this study refers to older persons living alone in the municipality. Consequently, thematic analysis was chosen to align with the contribution attributed to case studies: extending theories and deepening understanding of a particular phenomenon (Mishra & Dey, 2022).

Research Participants

The participants in this study were older persons living in the barangays of Labo, Camarines Norte. The municipality is home to more than twelve thousand senior citizens and is the largest town in the province. In July of 2023, the province, along with six locations in the Philippines, was identified as an age-friendly banner community in the country (Philippine Information Agency, 2023). Fifteen (15) participants were identified and included in this study. These participants were identified based on recommendations from key informants. The participants of this study were identified using criterion sampling. Thus, the participants of this study possessed the following criteria: (1) 65 years old and above, (2) living alone for the past six months, and (3) a resident of the barangays located near the center of the town. Participants from the urban barangays were selected for homogeneity, as they have greater access to the municipality’s transportation and public spaces, which are key to understanding the social dimension of the participants' spaces. Data collection stopped with 15 participants,

as data saturation had already been achieved, providing sufficient data to explore and understand the objectives of the study. Additionally, five key informants were selected based on their personal interaction with the participants and their knowledge of government programs and policies for the elderly in the research locale.

Data Gathering Procedure / Analysis Technique

This study employed a data collection technique that involved triangulation. Data collection began with photographs of public spaces accessible to the participants in this study. It includes public transit access points, pathways, a church, a town hall, and a public market, among other amenities. These photographs were used during the in-depth interview as part of a photo-elicitation technique. Photo elicitation techniques were usually used to enhance the quality of interviews (Gill, 2024). Furthermore, the photo elicitation technique served as a manifestation of participatory research, aimed at promoting a “cooperative experiential inquiry” (Nind, 2011). Guided by Henri Lefebvre’s social dimension of spaces, the in-depth interview questions revolved around participants’ experiences of their physical environment (perceived spaces/conceived spaces), enhanced by the photo elicitation technique, and their daily experiences (lived spaces). A separate interview guide focused on the government program and policies was prepared for the key informants in this research. Data from this interview will serve to validate the programs and policies experienced by the participants. Additionally, key informants were asked to provide secondary data, such as barangay ordinances, which were used as evidentiary support in organizing themes for conceived spaces.

Transcriptions of the interviews with participants and key informants in this study were then subjected to thematic analysis. The thematic analysis followed the three-level coding technique (a. initial coding (basic themes), b. focused coding (organizing themes), and lastly, c. theoretical themes (global themes) (Mishra & Dey, 2022). Coding was done manually by the researcher. The coding process employed both deductive and inductive methods of analysis. The deductive process was guided by Lefebvre’s theoretical definition of the three social dimensions of spaces. It paved the way for identifying the basic themes and clustering them to form the organizing themes. The inductive process was used to analyze the organizing themes and identify global themes within each space category. The created global theme contextualized the three categories of spaces as experienced by the participants. Finally, a composite narrative was presented that captures the collective experiences of older persons living alone with reference to Lefebvre’s three social dimensions of spaces.

Ethical Considerations

This study employed several ethical considerations grounded in research ethics. Prior to the interview, the researcher discussed informed consent with the participant. The respondents in this research were older persons; thus, additional considerations regarding their vulnerability were taken into account. These were as follows: (1) Physical and emotional inequities, (2) ethical communication, and (3) age bias (Arrant, 2020). Furthermore, specific ethical considerations were used in the photo elicitation technique and employed the following considerations: (a) photos were limited to spaces and do not feature human beings, (b) one type of device was used in this research and (c) the photographs were tested with older adults to ensure that the printed photographs were clear and legible for the target participants and (Bugos et al., 2014). Lastly, this paper followed the author’s academic institution’s commitment to integrity and ethical conduct. This was accomplished by obtaining clearance from the Research Integrity and Compliance Office (RICO) of the researcher’s university as proof that this paper has undergone ethical review.

Researcher’s Role

In this study, the researcher adopted the role of an observer and was compelled to make only factual observations and to facilitate open-ended interviews. The researcher is fully aware of his positionality, and potential bias was addressed by using the triangulation method in data collection. Maintaining an etic perspective was achieved by relying on the theoretical underpinning of Lefebvre’s theory of the production of spaces. The theory provided the researcher with the necessary structure and framework for executing data collection and analysis. Interpretive bias was minimized through periodic consultation with a colleague regarding the analysis process, which provided invaluable feedback on theme identification. Voice recordings of his personal insights allowed the researcher to separate personal impressions.

Results and Discussion

Profile of Case Study Participants

Fifteen participants were identified in this study. The average age of the participants is seventy-four (74) years

old, with the youngest being sixty-six (66) years old and the oldest eighty-five (85) years old. Twelve participants grew up in the same municipality, two in the neighboring municipality, and one in the nearby province. The participants were predominantly females, with twelve (12) cases, and only three (3) males.

Table 1. Profile of the Case Participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Civil Status	Religion	Highest Educational Attainment	Source of Financial Resources
1	73	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Four	Sari-sari Store
2	83	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Six	Kitchen Help / Hog Farmer
3	74	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Three	Social Pension
4	75	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Two	Allowance from children
5	66	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Six	Wage as a street sweeper
6	79	M	Widower	Catholic	Grade Two	Social Pension
7	72	F	Widow	Catholic	High School	Dressmaking / SSS Pension
8	70	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Six	Social Pension
9	74	F	Separated	Catholic	Grade Six	Selling of Coconut Broom
10	72	F	Widow	Catholic	2 nd Year High School	Sari-sari Store
11	72	F	Widow	Catholic	2 nd Year High School	Social Pension
12	69	M	Separated	Catholic	Vocational	Commission-based/Sales Agent
13	81	F	Widow	Catholic	3 rd Year High School	Social Pension
14	85	F	Widow	Catholic	Grade Three	Allowance from children
15	69	M	Separated	Catholic	High School	Allowance from children

Additionally, five key informants were identified in this study. Two of them are the BASCA President (Barangay Senior Citizen Association), one is a barangay council that oversees the senior citizen concern in his community, one is the municipality's head of the Office for Senior Citizen Affairs (OSCA), and the last one is the head of the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office.

Perceived Spaces as Contextualized by Older Persons Living Alone

Drawing on Lefebvre's concept, this study's perceived spaces include the physical spaces that shape participants' daily experiences.

Issues with Single-Room Living Space

Most participants lived in a single-room space. The walls were usually made of lightweight materials such as bamboo and "*lawanit*" (plywood). In some cases, printed tarpaulins of local politicians were used as walls. "*Pawid*" (nipa palm) was predominantly used for roofs. Most of the rooms have earthen flooring. Furthermore, there is an observed lack of essential parts of the house, such as the kitchen and comfort rooms. Oftentimes, the supposed kitchen was usually found in areas strategically positioned for easy access. Clay furnaces, "*pugon*," were usually positioned outside the house or near the entrance door, subject to rain and wind. One participant recalled:

"What I did, Sir, is I bought a galvanized iron roofing because of the leaks; whenever there is rain, it leaks. Oh my God! My frying pan was sometimes affected by rainwater, and my food would get dirty. I paid somebody to install a roof, which is not nailed, it was just put there." - R2, Female, 83 years old

The same is true with their comfort rooms, usually located outside their living quarters. This directly affects their daily activities, such as defecating/urinating, bathing, and cooking. Daily activities became increasingly challenging as the participants' physical capacities deteriorated. Moreover, their pitiable condition was exacerbated by their earthen flooring and leaking roofs, which compromised their safety during heavy rains. Concerns about safety and security also recurred in this organizing theme, especially regarding potential criminals and snakes. Another important element of a single-room living space is the absence of sources of entertainment, except for a radio. This may be an indication of several factors: their poverty, their weakening eyesight, and their struggle to keep up with accessibility on digital technologies. Single-room living spaces represent the dual nature of living alone for the participants of this study. On one hand, the single-room layout makes daily life easier by allowing movement with minimal effort. On the other hand, the subpar materials, construction, layout, and lack of amenities in the house created a daily experience marred by hardship. Also included in this organizing theme is the discourse on informal settlements, as five participants reported not owning the land on which their houses are constructed. Ultimately, this organizing theme highlighted a

disadvantageous aspect of the participants' perceived spaces, as exhibited in the physical characteristics of their living spaces.

Engagement in the Backyard Industry

This organizing theme highlights the participants' main economic activities. It is grounded on two important aspects: (1) engagement in backyard industries, and (2) their accumulated skills as individuals that are utilized in managing these backyard industries. Both aspects reflect their ability to adapt to their situation, making use of available spaces to their benefit. The most common type of backyard industry is a *sari-sari* store. For most participants, this *sari-sari* store is their primary source of income. The management of a small *sari-sari* store is a central component of their daily activities and, more often than not, the center of their daily lives.

"I am reinvesting my money by constantly going to the market in the morning and in the afternoon, so that... I can save money, and people have something to buy.... I will open the store at 4 am, then I will go to the market, I will buy items, just like one time I do not have cigarettes to sell, I will buy them so that I can have income even if it is just a little."

- R1, Female, 73 years old

Other participants reported on engaging in other backyard industries such as piggeries. Hog farming is another backyard industry commonly mentioned in the participants' narratives. Vegetable farming, specifically of *gabi* (taro) and *kanggos* (camote), sold around the neighborhood and town market, also falls under this organizing theme.

"Before, I weed this area, up to that part (pointing to an area in the backyard), I kneel when I do this. I plant taro, camote, San Fernando, root crops; those were my plants. However, right now that I cannot kneel anymore, it is hard....I harvest it and sell it to the market for five pesos apiece. Sometimes, they bargain that five pesos, ask for three pesos. If you wanted to have money, you would agree to the bargain. I ask the neighbor's children to carry those products, because I cannot carry them." - R9, Female, 74 years old

This idea aligns with the findings of a study by the Coalition of the Services of the Elderly, Inc. (COSE) that older people were engaged in the informal economy, an industry highly dependent on the availability of spaces (Aquino, 2023). The participants' entrepreneurial skills enabled them to manage their *sari-sari* store, and their technical skills in sewing and *pagkakayas* (splintering) allowed them to support themselves financially. Engagement in informal jobs also falls under this organizing theme. One participant reported being employed as a bet collector in a small-time lottery; one works as a street sweeper on a 15-day rotation every month; and one works as a kitchen helper paid daily. This supports the idea that for older persons, employment opportunities are limited to part-time employment (Kwan & Tam, 2022). Consequently, this type of employment is characterized by unstable income and is vulnerable to environmental and economic crises. This organizing theme underscores the participant's ability to utilize available physical space to mitigate their financial burden.

Utilization of Private Outdoor Space

In this study, private outdoor space refers to the participants' backyards and immediate surroundings. This organizing theme presents how participants not only use their immediate surroundings for economic activities but also utilize them for various purposes. The scarcity of water and the lack of financial resources to pay for a water service provider led to the construction of a deep well. It may be in the participant's backyard or shared as a resource among the neighborhood.

"I do my own laundry...I usually, Sir. I ask someone to fetch water for me from that well (pointing to the well), I am afraid I might fall. I might die then and there. What I do is, I call the husband of my sister or my nephew, and they take turns helping me."-R3, Female, 74 years old

The backyard was also used to plant medicinal plants to treat various illnesses.

"I boil leaves for my diabetes, guyabano leaves, guava leaves, I include serpentine. That is what I drink."

-R5, Female, 66 years old

Because many of the participants use clay furnaces for cooking, the immediate surroundings also provide them with wood for cooking. Furthermore, the backyard serves as a leisure area for the participants, citing weeding

and gardening as major activities. Gardening, then, as a leisure activity, may be seen as an indication of what leisure is to an older person. Active utilization of private outdoor spaces can be considered a unique experience for older persons in rural areas. The availability of these spaces compelled the participants to remain mobile. Thus, it can be argued that these physical activities, which made participants more mobile, helped maintain their physical well-being.

Passive Engagement in Public Outdoor Spaces

In this study, public outdoor spaces include public transit access points, street footpaths, commercial spaces, parks, marketplaces, and government facilities. The photo elicitation technique was used in this section to guide the participants in making sense of these spaces (Bugos et al, 2014). This organizing theme reflects the participants' general attitude towards public outdoor spaces. Passivity among participants toward community concerns is often evident in their willingness to let experts and the government take charge of urban planning and other public affairs. It also reflects the participants' lack of interest and awareness in community planning. This is affirmed by their responses to questions about their participation in the barangay assembly, as almost all participants confessed to not raising any concerns during these meetings.

"I have nothing...to change there, it's up to the leaders." -R5, Female, 66 years old

This attitude towards these spaces reflects their behavior in public places. The participants reported navigating public spaces with utmost caution, moving as slowly as possible. This is also true when navigating the marketplace, church, and municipal hall.

"...I am just moving/going slowly, but there are times it really gets dark, especially when it is raining." -R2, Female, 83 years old

Some participants reported asking for friends or someone from the neighborhood to accompany them to town to buy groceries. The most important aspect of this organizing theme is the feeling of contentment and satisfaction with these public spaces. The participants treated urban planning with indifference.

"It's okay, everything is fine. When you cross the street, there are people who direct traffic, those "blue boys". They stop the cars and assist you when crossing the street." -R5, Female, 66 years old

This revealed important aspects of perceived spaces in public contexts. The participant's passivity and subsequent adjustment in navigating these public spaces may indicate flaws in the government's system for promoting inclusivity. Alternatively, the participant's disinterest stemmed from their focus on their most prevalent concern – daily survival.

Lived Spaces as Contextualized by Older Persons Living Alone

Lefebvre defined lived spaces as those centered on individuals who passively experience them; they are where their social life is located. In this study, lived spaces emerge from participants' daily experiences.

Moral Aspect of Living Alone

This organizing theme shows how the participants view their situations through the lens of morality and emotion. Several themes were under this organizing theme. Constant arguments experienced while living with children have been reported as one of the most pervasive factors in the decision to live alone. One participant believes that her presence in the house is the cause of the couple's constant argument. This made her feel like a burden and a nuisance to her children's family.

"I do not want to be a burden to them. Also, my daughter-in-law is ill-tempered, sometimes loses (respect). I do not want to receive harsh words. I do not want it." -R10, Female, 72 years old

In some cases, these arguments may be perceived as a form of disrespect by the elderly. Biased treatment from an in-law was also reported as one of the reasons why the participant decided to live alone. Marital separation was also highlighted in the narratives of the participants as a reason for living alone. Most of the participants were either widowed or separated from their spouses. Participants also reported feeling isolated while living with children. Ultimately, these changing dynamics led to the decision of independent living, which resulted in

financial neglect from children. However, it is notable that none of them view this negatively and even express understanding of their children's situation.

Another recurring theme in participants' responses is their belief that living alone removed the burden from their married children, with whom they previously lived with. In most cases, living alone was viewed as a responsibility towards their family. They believed that their children's families' financial resources should be allocated to their children's education rather than to their own needs.

"They do not understand me. I don't want to disturb them so that their children can study properly. I told them that if I were going to ask for money, they would not have enough to send their children to school. They don't need to think about me. Sometimes, I called them, "Mama...." It is okay with me; they just need to prioritize their children's education over mine. I can endure; they need to think about the children's future. They must do this, so my children do not suffer the way I do. I told them to do whatever they can to help their children finish their studies." -R10, Female, 72 years old

It can then be inferred here that their situation was viewed as an extended duty to children who have their own families, a moral responsibility. Furthermore, this is manifested in their reluctance to ask for help from an immediate family member. Carandang et al. (2023) found that the sense of being a burden to their families was the primary motivation for older persons' decision to remain in a home for the aged. This is mirrored and extended in this study, as participants not only believe that living alone relieves their families of a burden, but also that this is an extension of their responsibility to their families.

An accepting attitude towards their situation is another recurring theme under this organizing theme. Religion plays an important role in the emergence of this theme. Most participants were practicing Catholics, as evidenced by their membership in community religious organizations affiliated with this faith and by religious icons in their homes. It can be said then that their fatalistic attitude towards their situation stemmed from their strong Catholic orientation (Mamaug, 2019). This is exemplified in their full acceptance of their situation, which even extends to their attitude towards death and dying.

"Hmm, I do not have something to, felt like I am just waiting for death to come. I have nothing else to do in this life." -R5, Female, 66 years old

Their situation and its resolution were often seen as part of the divine will. Moreover, this fatalistic attitude can be viewed both positively and negatively. While this allowed them to demonstrate resilience in their daily challenges, it also made them passive about what they could change in their situation.

Meaning-Making in Place

This organizing theme highlights the lingering effect of the death of a loved one and its attachment to the participants' living spaces. A recurring theme in this category is the experience of caring for a loved one who is sick. Most female participants show devotion to their family members by caring for them until their death. One respondent shared the experience of providing care to a bedridden son. She blamed their poverty on the death of her son.

"this is the house where my firstborn son died... he undergone operation in his stomach, that is what I am sad about, we do not have money, we lack of...I am able to support him with food, whatever he wants, I gave it to him...after the operation, we do not have money to support him with medications. From my own money, I bought betadine, tissues, alcohol, etc....sometimes I felt he was still here lying on his bed." -R2, Female, 83 years old

This theme suggests that suffering and grieving may be a memory more powerfully associated with their sentiment toward the house. It can then be argued that, for some, happy memories were the main reason for staying over. However, death and grieving may be the more powerful memories associated with staying in the same household.

Relational Embeddedness in the Community

The organizing theme describes the relationship between participants and the community where they belong. Mutual help, a recurring theme under this category, is a long-enduring culture among Filipinos. Shared meal is

a manifestation of mutual help for the participants. However, this may also indicate food insecurity experienced by the participants.

"...whenever they have food, they see to it that they give me some. Sometimes, I get shy. Like Ms. Soriano, the house in front of me, just like the wife of ...the barangay captain, she brought me food. I am shy, because of their frequent visits with food to me." -R1, Female, 73 years old

The sense of community also manifests during occasions, as some participants reported offering their help, such as dishwashing and cooking, to their neighbors in exchange for food.

"Over there, I'm not saying it's heavy. I help them, even just by washing dishes." - R9, Female, 74 years old

This organizing theme contextualizes the concept of social isolation among older persons living alone. Steptoe et al. (2013) defined social isolation as an "objective and quantifiable reflection of reduced social network size and paucity of contact that can be reflected on social disconnectedness and perceived isolation. However, in this study, participants reported no social disconnection. A sense of belongingness was felt mainly in mutual help and shared meals. Furthermore, this organizing theme is consistent with the study by Cruz et al. (2019a), which found that older Filipinos are relatively uncommonly lonely. Consequently, the emergence of this organizing theme revealed that isolation and loneliness were not mutually exclusive in the participants' narratives. The isolation felt by the participants directly contrasts with the sense of community and belongingness felt in their neighborhood. It can be deduced that social isolation is a foreign feeling for the participants. The emergence of this organizing theme suggests the need for more precise conceptualizations of social isolation and loneliness, as their relationship is multidimensional and varies across cultures (Asante & Tuffour, 2022).

Chronic Health Condition as a Daily Reality

Most participants had a chronic health condition that was central to their daily lives. The chronic condition experienced by the participants resulted in a more difficult daily experience. Because of the nature of these chronic conditions, ranging from high cholesterol levels that result in constant dizziness to amputation, participants reported having difficulties in accomplishing daily tasks. One participant, an amputee, narrated:

"My friends help me and don't abandon me; when there's no water, they are the ones who fetch it for me."
-R15, Male, 69 years old

For some of the participants, the rainy season worsens these difficulties, particularly for those who cook with charcoal and dried wood. Another aspect of this chronic condition's effects is the limitation it imposes on one's ability to engage fully with one's surroundings. Chronic conditions not only affect their movement but also confine them to their house.

Non-Routinary Daily Activities

This organizing theme contextualizes the participants' perception of time. Because of their living situation, the schedule of daily chores and activities is practically non-existent. Instead, it is characterized by a whole-day activity centered on a specific duty that varies among participants. This is exemplified by those who manage backyard industries in which all other chores are treated as incidental activities. Those who own a sari-sari store often spend their time tending to their store while doing side chores such as cooking, laundry, or weeding. Moreover, those without backyard industries to attend to are free to use their time as they wish, cooking and doing chores whenever they wish. Some participants identified talking to neighbors as part of their daily activities, fondly calling it "*maritesan*".

"I went to the neighbor. Of course, I got bored. All I just do is wash clothes, clean the house, and I have nothing else to do."
-R2, Female, 83 years old

This supports the polychronic orientation of eastern countries; the participant's non-routine daily activities reflect their attitude towards time, often carried out in an unstructured, flexible manner. Thus, it can be assumed that this aspect of living is not only inherent to their condition but also a cultural phenomenon.

Social Pension as Primary Financial Source

For most participants, the social pension plays a significant role in their survival. The PhP 3000 (\$51) they received every six months was often their only source of income.

"I just wait for the government, what they give to senior citizens. I received money every three months."

-R3, Female, 74 years old

The PhP 500 monthly pension to be given to indigent senior citizens is based on Republic Act No. 9994 or the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010, the Social Pension for Indigent Senior Citizens (SPISC). To compensate for their economic inadequacy, they are frequently seen asking neighbors or even local government officials for money or food. They exchange their labor for food by doing the dishes for friends or neighbors, others manage backyard industries, while some are employed in the informal sectors. The payout of this monetary assistance was highly anticipated by most of the participants. Some even compared the feeling to that of Christmas, a clear manifestation of the importance of this monetary assistance.

Conceived Spaces as Contextualized by the Key Informants

Conceived Spaces are the conceptualizations of space made by experts, including policymakers. In the context of this study, this includes people with power and authority, represented by the BASCA Presidents, Barangay Council for Senior Citizen Affairs, the MSWDO, the Municipal Planner, and the Office of the Senior Citizen Affairs (OSCA) and their programs and policies for the elderly.

Encompassing Financial Aid from the Government for the Elderly

This organizing theme presents the various financial aid programs available to participants in this study. This organizing theme can be divided into two types. The first type is government-mandated financial assistance, including social pensions, birthday gifts, and burial assistance. Also included in this category were financial aids available to senior citizens. These financial benefits can be any of the following: (1) Social Pension – PhP 500 per month for indigent senior citizens, which they claim every three months. This monthly allowance is in pursuance of the Republic Act No. 9994 or the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2010. The Social Pension for Indigent Senior Citizens (SPISC) aims to improve living conditions, enhance indigent senior citizens' capacity to meet daily subsistence and medical needs, reduce hunger, and prevent neglect, abuse, or deprivation. The SPISC covers senior citizens who are frail, sickly, or have disability; who do not have a permanent source of income; who do not have regular support from family or relatives; and who are not receiving a pension from the Social Security System, Government Service Insurance System, Philippine Veterans Affairs Office, Armed Forces and Police Mutual Benefit Association, Inc., or any other insurance company. Five participants in this study identified social pension as their primary source of financial resources. Only one respondent reported receiving a pension from the Social Security System. (2) Birthday Gift – every senior citizen, regardless of economic status, receives cash as a birthday gift. To claim the birthday gift, a senior citizen must present their birth certificate and a valid ID. If the birthday gift cannot be personally received, an authorization letter and a valid ID for the representative must be presented. It can be claimed in the MSWD Office (Municipal Social Welfare and Development). Likewise, many barangays allocate funds through barangay ordinances for birthday gifts within their communities. The amount varies from one barangay to another; the cash gift may be availed through a process similar to that in the municipality. (3) Burial Assistance – the amount varies from one barangay to another. The mechanisms for awarding assistance also vary from one barangay to another. (4) AICS (Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations) is an immediate and temporary support to individuals and families facing crises. AICS provides different forms of assistance depending on the individual's circumstances. They require evidence based on the individual's situation prior to an assessment. The second type was income-generating projects initiated by the local government unit, specifically the barangay. The senior citizens were entitled to a taxable .5% of the barangay income, with members of BASCA (Barangay Council for Senior Citizen Affairs) deciding on where to allocate the funds. One key informant reported:

"Oh, it used to be thirty-six thousand, but PWD split it, so we only got eighteen thousand, then they deducted tax. I said, Why are seniors taxed? They deducted about 2,000, so we only received 16,000. It was actually more than two thousand, so sometimes I complain, asking why they deduct it. And they said, it's being deducted because things are different now."

-Informant, BASCA President

Some BASCA opted to use the money as an income-generating project for the community; a good example of this is the purchase of plastic chairs to be rented out. Income from this went to the senior citizens' fund. According to the informants of this study, funds were used to celebrate various occasions, such as Christmas and Valentine's Day. Other barangays also reported allocating funds for members' burial services. The majority of the key informants were unaware of the daily reality experienced by the participants; for most of the time, they believed that every senior citizen in the area was content and satisfied with their life.

"There is nothing; the senior citizens here are contented and don't have any problems. Whenever we have a meeting, they don't raise concerns, only those who are in an emergency, as in the case of death, that's all."

-Key Informant, BASCA President

This organizing theme presented two realities for older persons living alone. One, programs and projects at the barangay level focused on providing occasional financial aid as temporary solutions for senior citizens experiencing poverty. Two, these financial aids were often directed towards death, arguing that the focus of these aids was not necessarily on the quality of life of the members, but on the local government's views of the realities of older persons living alone.

Accessibility and Entertainment as a Priority

This organizing theme encompasses the non-monetary services and programs provided by the two municipal offices responsible for serving the needs of the elderly, namely the OSCA (Office of Senior Citizens Affairs) and the MSWDO (Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office). The OSCA, as the primary office responsible for the welfare of the senior citizens, at the time of this study, allocated funds for the following purchases: (1) subscription to a monthly internet and television programming provider, (2) a new laptop worth Php 35,000, and (3) a new videoke system worth Php 25,000 for the fiscal year 2024-2025. Accordingly, the logic behind these purchases was to entertain BASCA Presidents during meetings. The new videoke unit was available to all members who wanted to use it. When asked whose decision it was to purchase the videoke, the informant said (about BASCA Presidents).

"...it was them, we had a meeting and they agreed, they are now willing to have a project because they said it's sad that when we have meetings, we don't have a sound system, and we end up renting a videoke for 400 pesos every time."

- Informant, OSCA President

At the provincial level, a satellite office in Sitio Mat-I, Vinzons, Camarines Norte, offered free medications, walking sticks, and wheelchairs upon request from BASCA. Accessibility is a major concern in urban planning. An informant stated that the government mandated every barangay to allocate an area for a senior citizen office. The barangay has the jurisdiction to include the budget in its annual investment plan. For this study's locale, the municipal government allocated a 20% development fund to each barangay. However, the discretion lies with the barangay regarding which infrastructure it deems most needed.

"...we are already working on the accessibility, the ramps. That is our top consideration during construction. Because, since they are elderly, and of course, [the location] is not too far for senior citizens to reach, considering their capacity. Sometimes, it's just right beside the barangay hall, right beside the pavement, that's where they place it. So, it is focused on accessibility."

- Informant, MSWDO

This organizing theme reveals the mismatch between institutional policies and the realities of the participants. How the participants passively experienced public spaces and their indifference towards urban planning clearly shows an inconsistency between governments' policies and the daily experiences of older persons living alone. This is further implicated by local purchases' focus on the entertainment aspect of the aging experience.

Unreported Incidents of Elderly Abandonment and Abuse

This organizing theme highlights the process and treatment of elderly abandonment and abuse in the municipality. One key informant confirmed that their office has encountered cases of older persons living alone; however, they believed that such situations were self-imposed. This confirms the participants' narrative, which views their situation as a responsibility to their family rather than their own choice.

"...usually we encounter [cases] where they are just beside their children. Because that is how some elderly people are. There is this... I don't know how to put it. It's like they have this mindset where they don't want to live with their children. They prefer to be alone. That is what it is – instead of living with them, they want to have their own space." - Informant, MSWDO

This organizing theme also confirms that proximity between the elderly living alone and their immediate kin is a major factor in considering cases of elderly abandonment and neglect.

"But their children still check on them regularly. It's like, they are just neighbors to their children. Because there are some senior citizens who prefer to have their own [independent] space." - Informant, MSWDO

Thus, no cases of elderly abandonment were ever reported in the municipality. Consequently, the issue of assessing elderly abandonment and neglect falls on an important flaw in the assessment process, an assessment tool that considers the proximity of immediate kin as an indicator of non-abandonment and neglect. This confirms the issue previously identified by Teerawichitchainan et al. (2015) that the presence of an immediate family member within the same barangay contributes to an improper identification of cases of elderly abandonment and neglect. Furthermore, the province's lack of home care facilities to cater to such cases contributed to these cases going unreported.

The Case of Older Persons Living Alone in Labo, Camarines Norte

The social reality of older persons living alone in Labo, Camarines Norte, can be revealed by understanding the dynamics among Lefebvre's three levels of space. Lefebvre conceptualizes these levels of space in a dialectical manner: no aspect of space can be isolated from the others. Each constitutes a part of the participants' reality that can be better understood when viewed in totality. Perceived spaces, as the physical aspect of spaces, have become spaces for survival. Themes that emerged in this category of space revealed how these spaces, serving as a material condition, paved the way for the participants' survival practices. The single-room living space and its issues are manifestations of the layers of disadvantage experienced by the participants. These living spaces represent a duality in their daily experiences. Because of its small area, it allowed participants to maneuver easily, completing their daily tasks more easily. However, the location and substandard materials used in the house's construction posed a daily safety and security risk to the participants. Consequently, this has become a precondition for the participants' engagement in small-scale, informal backyard industries. This engagement, though characterized by unstable income and vulnerability to environmental and economic crises, has become their primary means to survive. This showcased their technical and managerial skills accumulated through years of experience. Hog farming and vegetable farming were the most common backyard industries exhibited by the participants. Aside from serving as sites of economic activity, these spaces were also used to meet essential needs, such as obtaining water from deep wells and wood for cooking. These backyards were also used to cultivate medicinal plants for treating various illnesses, indicating the participants' knowledge of both traditional and alternative medicines. While participants utilized private outdoor spaces to shape them to suit their needs, public outdoor spaces were deemed untouchable. The emergence of this theme created a clear distinction between private outdoor spaces and public outdoor spaces. Public outdoor spaces were spaces passively experienced by the participants; roads, street footpath, transportation networks, government buildings, and commercial buildings were viewed with indifference. For the participants, public outdoor space should be left alone to experts. Spaces outside their community were viewed passively, creating a "demarcation line" between spaces where they actively participate and spaces that are only experienced.

Lived spaces, as the more subjective aspect of spaces rich with emotions and meanings, were shaped by economic underprivilege. This aspect of spaces primarily revealed the moral aspect of living alone. Strained relationships with immediate family members were identified as the main factor in their living situation. Constant arguments and perceived dislike felt from immediate family members were identified as reasons for the decision to live independently. Additionally, this led them to believe that living alone relieves their married children of the burden. Some participants believed that their children's families' financial resources must be allocated to their children's education. These beliefs compelled them to think that living alone is an extension of their responsibility to their family. The participants' chronic conditions intensified the difficulties in their daily lives. For most of the participants, this chronic illness confines them to remaining at home. Despite these narrated burdens, the participants displayed an accepting attitude towards their situation. Many believed that their situation and its eventual resolution were of divine will, a direct result of their unwavering religiosity.

Because of their subjective nature, lived spaces were also produced through the connectivity and sentimentality associated with them. Most women participants experienced caring for a sick loved one. This powerful memory suggests that suffering and grieving largely contribute to sentimentality, as the participants are attached to their houses, indicative of their meaning-making in place. The participants' non-routinary daily activities may be viewed as an indirect result of this economic underprivilege. This is most evident among participants whose daily lives were centered on managing backyard industries and sari-sari stores. For most participants, the five-hundred-peso monthly social pension for indigent senior citizens is their only source of income. The survival practices discussed in this category of space were mainly the result of this financial source's inadequacy in meeting their daily needs. On a more positive note, all participants felt a sense of community. They associate this with the mutual help observed within the neighborhood, signifying relational embeddedness in the community.

The disconnect between institutional priorities and lived needs shapes the participants' conceived spaces. Conceived spaces materialize as programs and policies at the barangay and municipal levels. The Philippine government, through Republic Act (RA) 9994, or the Expanded Senior Citizens Act of 2012, emphasized the valued Filipino tradition of caring for senior citizens and fostering the capacity to age more meaningfully and productively. However, themes that emerged in this space category show otherwise. Programs and policies in the barangay lack a focus on targeting the quality of life of senior citizens. This can be primarily seen on financial aids that do not necessarily address the different issues that come with independent living. Furthermore, community gatherings only cater to those able-bodied senior citizens who can physically enjoy them. This is true of older persons living alone, who, because of their constraints, are not able to attend and are unaware of these gatherings. Key informants also reported funding allocation for burial services assistance. This reveals a passive aspect of societal attitude towards healthy and active aging. This may seem to be a result of the key informants' belief that older persons in their community were content with their lives. This is no different from the municipality's priority on accessibility and entertainment. Accessibility is a central issue in public spaces; this is evident in the provisions stipulated in municipal planning. However, there is a disconnect in institutional policies, as the priority should be on the lack of facilities that promotes an active lifestyle for the elderly. This is further evident in priority purchases of entertainment items (e.g., videoke, laptops). Ultimately, a more pressing issue is the unpreparedness of the government offices for cases of elderly abandonment. This may be attributed to the absence of a proper assessment tool for identifying cases of elderly abandonment and to the lack of government facilities to address them.

Lefebvre (1974) categorizes space dialectically. He believed that human beings utilize spatial elements to organize a sequence of actions that produce social spaces. However, the themes that emerged in this study show that it is not always the case. The condition of older persons living alone in Labo, Camarines Norte, exemplifies this claim. Perceived spaces, as represented by physical spaces, their resources, and social networks, were shaped by economic underprivilege, which in turn shaped their survival practices. These practices, in turn, produce the moral and emotional aspects of their living situation, which can be interpreted as manifestations of their family obligations, religiosity, and acceptance. In a dialectical sense, the boundary between these two categories of space was blurred because the participants experienced them simultaneously. This is evident in the way conceived and lived spaces shape each other, mirrored in their very nature as spaces for survival brought about by their economic underprivileges. Consequently, the lack of programs and policies that address the unique situations of older persons living alone indicates that their circumstances may be considered a failure of the institutional framework to support them. Thus, the case of older persons living alone with reference to the three social dimensions of spaces paints a picture of survival shaped by economic underprivilege, further implicated by the government's oversight of their existence, making it a social blind spot.

Conclusion

Filipinos are known for their culture of caring for older persons. However, as the world changes, so does this culture; this is reflected in the growing discourse on elderly living arrangements (Cruz, 2025b). Evident in this is the increasing rate of the elderly living alone in the country (Francisco et al., 2023a). The World Health Organization addressed this situation by promoting the concept of "Aging in Place," which emphasizes the importance of remaining in one's familiar surroundings and maintaining social connectedness. However, studies on this concept have highlighted the lack of emphasis on the capacity of places to support the aging population, because of the challenges posed by different locations (Buffet & Phillipson, 2024b; Yarker et al., 2023; Francisco et

al., 2023b). In the Philippines, this is evident in the study by Carandang et al. (2020b), which highlights the lack of an age-friendly environment for the elderly. Consequently, the most vulnerable were the older persons living alone. It is imperative, then, that an understanding of how older persons living alone with reference to their local environment is of utmost importance for creating more sustainable policies that will respect the variations imposed by these different locations.

By drawing on Henri Lefebvre's social dimensions of space, this study identified and contextualized this understanding of spaces. Lefebvre conceptualized the social dimension of spaces in a dialectical manner; however, the relationship of themes in this study argues this dialectical nature to some degree. While perceived spaces and lived spaces define each other, conceived spaces were viewed by the participants with indifference. This argues Lefebvre's conception of the relationship between these spaces, highlighting the exclusion of conceived spaces as spaces devoid of participants' agency. The exploratory nature of this study revealed the theoretical underpinnings of Lefebvre's social dimensions of space; as such, it is imperative to validate these using quantitative methodologies to provide context on the magnitude of this phenomenon. This study validated the government's program and policies' disconnect in addressing the issues of older persons living alone supported the study by Carandang et al. (2020). This emphasized the need for urban planners to ensure representation from the older demographics in drafting age-friendly environment initiatives. Consideration of the construction of residential care facilities in preparation for the effects of ageing population was also highlighted in this study. The unreported cases of older persons living alone raised the question previously identified by Teerawichitchainan et al. (2015). The presence of a "quasi-coresidence" as a living arrangement contributed to the incorrect identification of abandonment and neglect. Thus, a proper assessment tool is needed to detect and assess such cases. Lastly, government programs that recognize the capabilities and skills of the elderly must be created to promote dignity in aging.

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