

Life on Three Wheels: Struggles, Endurance, and Work Dignity of Senior Citizen Drivers of Informal Passenger Transport Systems

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Abstract

Poor employment conditions among senior citizens are alarming. I examined the work conditions of senior citizens engaged in informal passenger transport systems. Descriptive qualitative design, purposive sampling, interview and observation approaches, and thematic analysis were the methods I applied. The data from five informants revealed that senior citizen drivers encounter struggles that make their work difficult and unstable. Resourcefulness, support from others, and faith sustain them. Dignity in honest work, wisdom, and future preparedness were learned. Community leaders, drivers, and passengers may provide social support programs that protect the welfare and dignity of senior citizen drivers. Future studies may expand the number of participants and research sites, include perspectives from key community stakeholders, and use mixed-methods to better understand how context, health, income, and support systems affect senior citizen drivers.

Keywords: Life on three wheels; struggles; endurance; work dignity; senior citizen drivers; informal passenger transport system

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *The Problem and Its Scope*

Poor employment conditions among senior citizen drivers were part of a broader global concern about older adults who remained in informal, insecure, and low-protective work. Recent literature describes older informal workers as belonging to labor groups whose work remains unsafe and insecure. It is marked by the continuing need for more stable income and pension support (Renacia, 2024). In low- and middle-income settings, scholarship also continues to locate informal employment within weak social protection arrangements, particularly where workers remain outside stable labor systems and formal welfare coverage (Torm & Oehme, 2024).

In various countries, similar poor employment conditions were documented among workers in informal transport and related informal livelihoods. In India, auto-rickshaw drivers are described as a marginalized urban transport workforce facing irregular income patterns, precarious working conditions, legal ambiguities,

and social stigma (Ojha, 2024). In Bangladesh, rickshaw pullers in Dhaka are described as workers experiencing health and income complications while working under difficult living, nutritional, and work conditions (Sultana, 2024). In Colombia, informal workers are situated within unstable livelihood conditions that require continuous adaptation to uncertainty and disruption (Staupe-Delgado, 2023).

In the Philippine context, poor employment conditions among senior citizen drivers were reflected in the wider realities of aging workers and informal transport workers. Renacia's study in Bukidnon presents indigent older persons in the informal economy as workers whose labor remains connected to concerns of physical, economic, psychological, and social well-being (Renacia, 2024). Onsay et al. (2025) identified informal transport drivers, including tricycle and pedicab drivers, as vulnerable workers in the informal transportation sector. Ramillano and colleagues also report that pedicab operations in Zamboanga City involve driver-related challenges, inconsistent service quality, and the need for fare standardization, regulation, and better driver support (Ramillano et al., 2024).

The employment conditions of elderly community citizen drivers need further academic research, as the issue was serious. Drivers were vulnerable due to an aging population, informal employment, and community transport. Community support was minimal for many drivers who depend solely on physical input, passenger flow, and vehicle leasing to earn a living. All of these factors impacted physical and mental safety, income stability, occupational security, dignity in work, and the ability to sustain their livelihood; therefore, their impact demonstrates that elderly community citizen drivers' living conditions were high-risk and much under-recognized.

1.2 Significance of the Study

This study was based on the requirement for all workers to receive adequate support from their inclusive labor, in line with UN Sustainable Development Goal 8 (SDG 8). For this analysis, senior citizens who continue working as self-employed drivers in the labor market was examined, including their hardships, resilience, and dignity, thereby contributing to the contextual discourse on this consumer group within transportation and labor. I presented their challenges so the world can appreciate them as employees and as older adults who were making every effort possible within the limitations of their own bodies and financial limitations. Policymakers and local government units may use the findings to better understand how to design programs that accurately address the needs of older informal workers. For scholars, it may help fill a gap in the literature that often sidelines the voices of older people in labor and transport studies. Ultimately, this study will benefit senior citizens by recognizing their contributions to the community, regardless of age or circumstances.

1.3 Research Questions

I examined the work conditions of senior citizens engaged in informal passenger transport systems. Specifically, it was guided by the following research questions:

- a. What struggles are experienced by senior citizen in their daily work?
- b. What forms of endurance are shown by senior citizen drivers despite the challenges they face?
- c. What meanings of work dignity are reflected in the experiences of senior citizen drivers?

1.4 Theoretical Lens

In framing this study, I used the Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), which viewed stress as a dynamic transaction between a person and the environment, rather than an external event on the one hand or merely an internal reaction to it (differentiation) on the other. This model posited that stress was defined as a person appraising the situation as taxing, threatening, or exceeding resources. The process begun with primary appraisal, in which the individual evaluates whether the event was

irrelevant, benign-positive, or stressful; if stressful, it may be judged as harm/loss, threat, or challenge. Primary appraisal was followed by a secondary appraisal, in which the person assessed available coping resources and possible responses. Problem-focused and emotion-focused strategies represented types of coping that involve efforts to address (problem-focused) or manage (emotion-focused) the emotional impact of stressful situations. As such, this model highlighted the fact that the amount of stress a person experiences (i.e., stress) may be influenced by how they perceive and evaluate a particular event and by their use of coping strategies to address or manage that stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

1.5 Paradigm

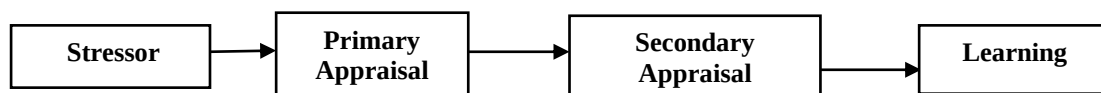


Figure 1. Transactional Model of Stress and Coping by Lazarus and Folkman (1984)

1.6 Assumptions

Several assumptions guided this research. Regarding ontology, I assumed that multiple realities exist and that these realities were subjective, defined by older adults' emotional, social, and financial struggles within their cultural context. Regarding epistemology, I assumed that knowledge was mutually created between the researcher and participants through conversation, storytelling, and interpretation. Regarding axiology, I assumed that values influenced research and, therefore, that research must include the voices of marginally employed older adults, as demonstrated by the principles of empathy, respect, and social justice. Regarding methodology, I assumed that a qualitative case study design was the best way to extract the depth, essence, and meaning of their struggles, their ability to persist, and their dignity while working.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research Design

In my study, I adopted a descriptive qualitative research design. A descriptive qualitative research design was used to provide a clear, direct, and detailed description of a phenomenon based on participants' actual experiences, perceptions, and meanings (Ayton, 2023). It was applied to answer what and how questions, such as describing the struggles, endurance, and work dignity of senior citizen drivers without manipulating variables or generating a formal theory (Furidha, 2023). This design was advantageous because it was simple, flexible, practical, and close to participants' real narratives, allowing the researcher to present findings that were understandable and useful for community programs, policy recommendations, and future interventions (Hall & Liebenberg, 2024; Oranga & Matere, 2023).

2.2 Locale of the Study

This study was conducted in Matina Pangi, an urban barangay in the southern part of Davao City. Davao City, recognized as the largest city in the Philippines in terms of land area, was a highly urbanized hub in Mindanao that continued to expand in terms of population and economic activity (PSA, 2021). Residential neighborhoods, small-scale commercial establishments, and narrow interior roads characterized Matina Pangi.

Within this context, senior citizen drivers were a visible part of everyday mobility, balancing the physical demands of their work with the struggles of aging and economic necessity.

2.3 Sample and Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling to select participants. Purposive sampling was a nonprobability sampling technique in which the researcher intentionally selects participants who can provide rich, relevant information about the phenomenon being studied (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participants were currently engaged in the informal passenger transport systems within Matina Pangi, Davao City. They had at least ten (10) years of cumulative experience as a driver, regardless of whether this service was continuous or intermittent. This approach allowed me to collect meaningful insights that directly address the research objectives.

The criteria were designed to ensure that participants possess sufficient experiential depth and contextual familiarity to articulate meaningful reflections on their struggles, endurance, and dignity at work. For this study, 5 senior citizen rent-to-drive drivers from Matina Pangi were interviewed. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological studies typically involve 5 to 25 participants to capture in-depth descriptions of their lived experiences. As Patton (2015) noted, small, information-rich samples allowed researchers to conduct in-depth analysis and produce “thick descriptions” that reveal the complexity of human experience.

2.4 Data Gathering Technique

In this study, I conducted an In-Depth Interview technique as my primary data collection method. I led the discussion in a semi-structured manner to explore participants' insights and gain deeper, personal insights. Together, these methods allowed the study to capture collective views and unique individual experiences. The participants permitted me to audio-record the discussion, and I transcribed it verbatim. To ensure the confidentiality of the data, I securely stored the participants' transcripts and audio recordings.

2.5 Data Analysis Technique

Thematic analysis was used in this research project, and I followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarization with the data, coding, theme development, theme review, theme definition, and theme reporting. The themes emerged from my coding of the data and working with the themes generated from my data (Terry et al., 2017).

In the beginning stages, I familiarized myself with my data (the transcripts) by reading them multiple times. I coded the data next and developed related codes into categories based on the research questions. I also performed a word-frequency and co-occurrence analysis of the data to identify consistent terms, patterns, themes, and relationships among the identified items. I used my analysis of the codes and categories to identify the significant themes in my data, providing a deeper understanding of the difficulties, resilience, and dignity of senior citizen drivers at work.

2.5 Trustworthiness

As described by Guba (1981), I included the key criteria for establishing trustworthiness in this project. I recognized that maintaining ethical practices was a priority while conducting the study of senior citizen drivers as participants. This research study was conducted in accordance with the protocol established by the HCDC SMILE Review Standards. Before data collection, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participants, explaining the research background, the benefits of participating, and their ability to withdraw at any time during the research without negative consequences.

No risks were identified due to the extensive investigation of this study. Confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were ensured. Findings were manipulated to ensure truthful reporting. In addition, appropriate citations have been provided for previously published studies.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Interconnected Struggles in Driving

The results of this study revealed that elderly drivers experienced social devaluation and marginalization due to their age. Because elderly drivers were viewed as not driving as well due to their age (e.g., being slower or weaker), many drivers appeared to have social (physical) limitations while driving. They did not receive help or respect from other drivers. There was also an indication of decreased physical function and driving ability due to aging. Since driving requires physical exertion to move the vehicle, the physical limitations of these drivers have limited the number of trips they can take and directly reduced their income. This study demonstrated that drivers lacked stable, secure income and depended on consumer demand, school transport schedules, weather, and daily expenses related to renting vehicles. Although many older drivers worked while tired, sick, or exhausted due to physical limitations, they continued to work to earn income for food or other daily living expenses.

On top of being exposed to many dangers while working (like heat and rain), they could also get sick or injured. That could leave them unable to make money at all, because they will not be able to drive a tricycle anymore; therefore, they will have no income for that day because all of their work has been interrupted by health issues due to working conditions such as fatigue, body pains, high blood pressure, or rheumatism.

The results also showed how fragile the drivers' jobs really are and how limited their ability to earn money can be due to damaged tricycles, unsafe traffic, limited routes, and poor road conditions that delay their work and income opportunities. Since drivers' ability to earn income depends on both their physical condition (i.e., healthy vs. sick) and the condition of their tricycles and roads, anything that disrupts either will reduce their income.

"Sometimes, there are passengers who don't ride with me because, in their view, I'm already a bit old. (R2, line 60)."

"Some passengers don't like riding with senior citizen trisikad drivers because they think they are slower compared to the younger drivers. (R9, line 265)."

"Usually, when he drives for a long time or when the weather is very hot, Ma'am, it becomes difficult (R6, line 166)."

"What hinders me from driving is my allergy—when I inhale dust, I get very itchy (R2, line 22)."

"The sikad breaks down... that is what delays the work (R5, lines 178)."

3.2 Enduring through Faith and Support

The results also revealed that senior citizen drivers endured struggles through agentic survival coping, actively continuing to work, seeking ways to earn, asking for help, and facing their problems despite exhaustion and hardship. Their coping is not passive endurance but a deliberate effort to survive and provide for their families. Another form of endurance is psycho-emotional regulation, the driver's ability to remain calm, patient, and emotionally controlled despite stress, fatigue, and frustration. They cope by relaxing, praying, talking to others, listening to music, using phones, or simply maintaining patience while working.

The findings also showed adaptive resource management, where the drivers manage limited money, time, energy, and physical strength in practical ways. Because their income is unstable, they borrow money, seek help from neighbors, rest when they are tired, drink water, wait for passengers, and limit their working time to

avoid exhaustion. The drivers also rely on relationally mediated coping, which means that their family, relatives, neighbors, friends, co-drivers, and spouses serve as sources of emotional and practical support. Their coping is not purely individual because talking to trusted people helps them release stress and feel less alone.

Lastly, the results reveal the construction of faith-based resilience, where prayer and belief in God become important sources of strength, hope, and endurance. The drivers turn to faith not necessarily to remove their hardships, but to gain the strength to continue working despite physical exhaustion and economic uncertainty.

"I approach the lender, the 5-6 lender, so that my hardship can be relieved (R2, 511)."

"they stop... drink water, take some rest... and relax for a while (R10, 798)."

"they use their phones... to cope with boredom (R9, 684)"

"They talk with their companions. Of course, that is a big help...(R11, 835)."

"You just also turn to God... and He will repay you with His grace...(R5, 629)."

3.3 Wisdom through Honest Labor

The results revealed that senior citizen drivers developed enduring learning as they progressed. For them, hardship is not something that completely stops life; rather, it becomes a condition they must face with patience, persistence, and courage. Despite physical exhaustion, uncertain income, and aging limitations, they continue to work because they believe that life requires movement and effort. Another important learning is finding dignity in labor. The drivers realized that even if driving is physically demanding and sometimes socially undervalued, it remains honorable because it is honest, legal, and helps sustain their families. They do not define the worth of their work by social status, but by its decency and purpose.

The result further showed that, through hardships, the drivers became wiser. The income problems, health problems, the challenges of old age, the lament of poverty, and, sometimes, lost opportunities - all these really made them think more deeply about life. Many of their lessons learned became pieces of advice for the younger ones on hard work, conduct against vices, health care, and other topics, including good choices to make while still young.

Lastly, the results revealed the learning of planning ahead despite uncertainty. The drivers realized that old age becomes more difficult when there are no savings, a stable income, or a strong support system. Because of this, they emphasized the importance of saving money, preparing for retirement, caring for the body, and planning early while one is still able to work.

"Whatever problem comes to you, you still need to strive and work every day for your family and for yourself (R12, 1243-1245)."

"Before, I used to drink a lot... but now I have realized that I should stop so I will not develop many illnesses...(R4, 1006)."

"This work is not something to be ashamed of... unlike stealing...(R4, 999)."

"While still young, one should have set aside money and saved (R1, 916-918)"

"You need to manage your finances wisely... plan your life as early as now so that when you reach your senior years, you are secured (R9, 749-751)."

3.4 Modified Paradigm

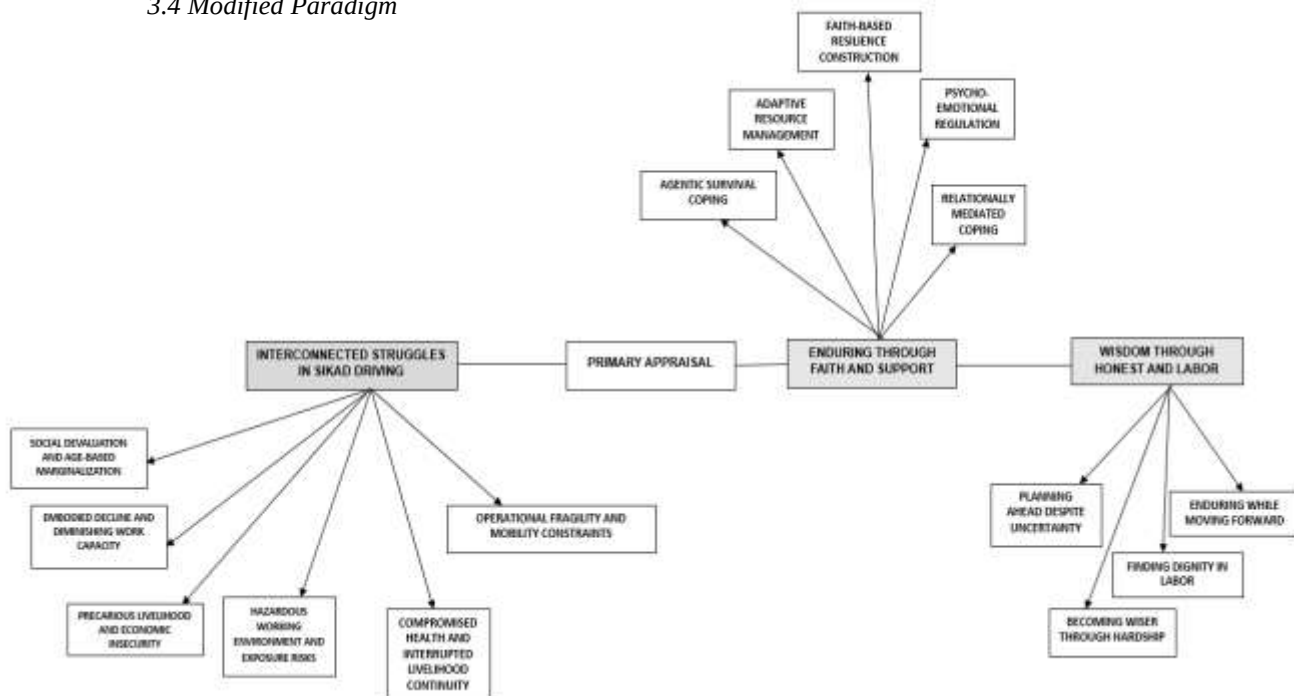


Figure 2. A Schematic Diagram of the Central Themes and Emerging Themes of the Struggles, Endurance, and Work Dignity of Senior Citizen Drivers

3.5 Summary of Findings

Drawing from the narratives shared by the study participants, the following findings emerged from the data analysis.

1. The senior citizen drivers face interconnected social, physical, economic, environmental, health-related, and operational struggles that make their daily livelihood unstable, risky, and physically demanding.
2. The senior citizen drivers endure through persistence, emotional control, resourcefulness, support from family and community, and faith, allowing them to continue working despite hardship.
3. The experiences of the senior citizen drivers teach them to endure, value the dignity of honest labor, become wiser through hardship, and prepare for the future despite uncertainty.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Interconnected Struggles Driving

In this research, I found that the senior citizen drivers face interconnected social, physical, economic,

environmental, health-related, and operational struggles that make their daily livelihood unstable, risky, and physically demanding. This finding aligns with Baral et al. (2024), who asserted that tricycle drivers experience multiple occupational stressors, particularly financial concerns, physical strain, and environmental obstacles. This supports the current finding by showing that transport work is not only economically unstable but also physically and environmentally demanding. Their study further found that drivers experienced fatigue, anxiety, somatic complaints, aggression, and distraction, suggesting that the difficulties of informal transport work affect both bodily health and emotional well-being. Moreover, my findings affirm those of Onsay et al. (2025), indicating that informal transport drivers, including tricycle and pedicab drivers, are vulnerable to poverty due to their prolonged participation in the informal economy, rural residence, and limited socioeconomic opportunities. This finding is parallel because it confirms that informal transport livelihoods are structurally insecure and expose drivers to ongoing economic vulnerability.

Nonetheless, my results differ from Renacia's (2024) assertions regarding the benefit that poor elderly individuals perceive from being physically and socially active, even though they have unsafe and insecure jobs and continue to remain vulnerable. In addition, Kim et al. (2023) found that older people who have balanced work hours, combined with sufficient social interaction, are less likely to show symptoms of depression compared to those who have low work hours and little social engagement. These observations support the notion that elderly individuals can derive benefits, in the forms of activity, sense of purpose, connection with others, and protection from psychological harm, from participating in their livelihoods, and that, under certain circumstances, participating in their livelihoods does not have to be viewed as negative.

4.2 Enduring through Faith and Support

In this study, I also found out that senior citizen drivers endure struggles through persistence, emotional control, resourcefulness, support from family and community, and faith, allowing them to continue working despite hardship. This finding aligns with Acapulco et al. (2024), who reported that tricycle drivers cope with economic pressure by persevering, budgeting, accepting passengers without being selective, limiting long-distance trips, reducing personal expenses, and working longer hours. This supports the current finding by reflecting persistence, resourcefulness, and livelihood adjustment as survival strategies among transport workers facing hardship. Furthermore, my findings support those of Baral et al. (2024), showing that tricycle drivers demonstrate resilience by using coping mechanisms such as seeking social support, engaging in leisure activities, and practicing relaxation techniques to manage occupational stress. This parallels the present finding by showing that drivers do not merely endure hardship passively; rather, they regulate their emotions, rely on support systems, and use practical coping strategies to continue working despite stress.

However, the findings of this study contradict Acoba's (2024) conclusion that social support enhances mental well-being through perceived stress, suggesting that family and community social networks may become inadequate when severe, unremitting stress persists. Therefore, even though older drivers have used tenacity, emotional control, resourcefulness, support systems, and faith to work through incremental difficulties, they cannot always maintain their mental wellness or continue working if inequity becomes too extreme.

4.3 Wisdom through Honest Labor

Through this research, I found that the experiences of the senior citizen drivers teach them to endure, value the dignity of honest labor, become wiser through hardship, and prepare for the future despite uncertainty. This finding aligns with Staupé-Delgado's (2023) study, which asserts that informal workers adapt their livelihoods in times of turmoil by developing temporal strategies to manage uncertainty. The result also supports the present finding because the hardships of senior citizen drivers not only cause suffering but also foster practical wisdom, endurance, and future-oriented preparation as they navigate unstable livelihood conditions. On top of that, Renacia (2025) found that indigent older persons in the informal economy continue working because informal work provides income and keeps them physically and socially active, which they

perceive as contributing to improved well-being. The finding parallels the present finding because drivers' experiences also show endurance, dignity in honest labor, and life learning despite uncertainty. Renacia further noted that older informal workers still aspire to a more stable income and pension support, which aligns with the current finding that they are preparing for the future despite insecurity.

The findings from my research challenge the beliefs of Mai (2023) regarding how precarious employment hurts the well-being of workers by suggesting that unstable and insecure employment not only places economic and social risks onto workers themselves, but also that hardship does not generate dignity, endurance, or wisdom, but rather that precarious employment may reduce workers' sense of security, health, and future planning capabilities.

4.4 Implications to Practice

Community stakeholders, barangay officials, and tricycle drivers can create additional meaningful assistance to help support senior citizen drivers. Assistance will include: routine medical check-ups; assistance with livelihood; fare/route regulation; maintenance assistance; available shaded waiting spaces; emergency funding; and programs that highlight the importance of seniors in providing mobility in the community. Passengers and other members of the community must treat senior citizen tricycle drivers with patience, fairness, and respect, especially since their work requires significant physical exertion and they are in unstable financial situations.

4.5 Future Directions of the Study

Future research may include more senior citizen drivers from different barangays or cities to understand better how their areas, roadway patterns, the number of passengers requesting transport, and support from local governments affect the types of issues they face and how they handle them. Researchers could also investigate the viewpoint(s) of barangay leaders, transport associations, family members, and passengers in order to provide an overall view of the level of social and institutional support given to older adults working in informal transportation systems. In addition, researchers should consider a mixed-methods design to examine the relationships among senior driver age, health, income stability, and quality of life.

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