Chapter 6

Summary and Conclusion

There is a dramatic increase in the number of older adults in our society. Researchers, policy makers and caregivers are changing their focus from caring for older adults to propagating active ageing which involves encouraging them to be independent and effective contributors to society. Researchers are also taking a keen interest in improving the facilities available to older adults to enable them to live quality lives (Bowling, 2008).

Earlier, decisions pertaining to older adults were based on the views of researchers, health care professionals and policy makers. Researchers have realized that it is also important to understand old age from the perspective and experiences of older adults themselves (Bacsu et al., 2014).

The aim of this research was to understand the process of development of psychological capital in positive ageing.

The study aimed at exploring the following research questions:

- In what way do the life experiences of older adults facilitate the development of self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, gratitude and spirituality?
- What are the changes in their lives and the challenges faced in the development of psychological capital?
- What are the strategies they adopted to cope with the changes that occurred in the process of development of psychological capital?

To gain insight into the research questions a qualitative research design was considered most appropriate. To assimilate individual life experiences of older adults, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was adopted as a method of analysis.
Participants were chosen using purposive sampling. Personal interviews were conducted with 14 participants, both men and women in the age group of 70 to 80 years, middle class, retired, whose spouses had expired at least a year ago and were living with family in Bengaluru. They had a minimum of 10th grade education, could speak English and had retrospective memory. They had no significant psychiatric or physical illness.

A semi structured interview schedule was developed, and face validity was ascertained. The credibility of the findings and interpretation of results were validated by supervision and an audit; and a member check. The researcher also maintained a journal to bracket off personal biases; an independent coder was used and inter coder reliability was established.

Three super-ordinate themes emerged from the data. The first super-ordinate theme was factors that promote development of PsyCap varies, with two sub themes:

Social networks facilitate the formation of PsyCap and

Relies on internal strengths to face adversity

The second super-ordinate theme was personal trauma and inadequacies as learning opportunities, with three sub themes:

Experience of the loss of loved ones helps to realize social support around

Lack of adequate resources facilitates the growth of Psychological capital and

One's awareness of past regrets leads to realistic future choices
The third super-ordinate theme Spiritual and philosophical ways of adaptation with three sub themes:

A never say die attitude to bounce back to reality,

Inclination to spirituality makes adaptation to changes more meaningful and

The evolving of life's philosophy

**Major Findings of the Study**

Older adults add value to the family and contribute to society in various ways, some of which are sharing of wisdom, gratitude, spirituality, resilience, optimism, hope and confidence (PsyCap). These are the mental resources that they have developed through their life experiences when things went well and which they could fall back on when faced with challenges. Hence the researcher felt the need to listen to older adults as they shared their lived experiences, in order to help in the promotion of a positive attitude towards older adults and the ageing process.

As the researcher journeyed with the participants in this study, insights were gained about their personal experiences right from childhood to old age. The participants were willing and enthusiastic to share their experiences and they felt lighter at the end of the interview, which indicated that having someone to listen to their life story made their life unique and cathartic.

While exploring the first research question, namely in what way do the life experiences of older adults facilitate the development of self-efficacy, optimism, hope, resilience, gratitude and spirituality, the researcher explored the experiences of older adults, as far back as they could remember from their childhood to their present state
as older adults. Results indicated that only a few older adults shared experiences from their childhood, many of them remembered and spoke about experiences from adolescence and adulthood and all of them very enthusiastically shared their experiences as they ventured into old age.

For all the participants, the family was the strongest support and the focal point of their lives. The support from their families helped them develop the positive aspects of their personalities. They shared experiences where they received unconditional support and encouragement from parents, siblings, children and their extended families.

Ten out of the 14 participants shared that their parents encouraged them to pursue their dreams in childhood and adolescence; and supported and guided them whenever necessary. They gave them the freedom to make use of opportunities that came their way.

In the process of experiencing and coping with trials, challenges and hardships in life their faith and trust in God was enhanced and strengthened. They also grew in wisdom and spirituality. Each of them had also developed their own philosophy to life which they strongly believed in and gave them the motivation and enthusiasm to live life to the fullest.

Since the participants were older adults they were at a stage where they had completed their duties as parents and could reminiscence and contemplate on the meaning of life. They felt grateful for a life well lived; while looking appreciatively at how God’s plan for them unravelled in their lives and the ways in which they, in turn, touched the lives of people around them. Though they were feeling satisfied, they did have a few regrets, but on the whole, life was worthwhile and rewarding.
Research question two examined the changes in their lives and the challenges faced in the development of psychological capital. For all the participant's life had its ups and downs. Eighty percent of them came from broad minded and supportive families, over protective parents and a carefree and fun-loving childhood with ample scope for adventure and opportunities to do the impossible. But life changed once they got married.

Thirty percent of the participants lost their spouses at an early age and had to cope with loneliness and grief. They had to start life anew, sometimes in a new city and did not have much time for friends. It was a challenge to cope with financial difficulties as they struggled to make ends meet, take up a job, care for the home and children and so much more.

Sixty percent of the older adults had a very challenging family life; a change from a carefree life during childhood, to a life filled with challenges and restrictions. They had to make adjustments and sacrifices. Nine of them had to care for a terminally ill spouse and six of the participants had to care for a parent or a parent in law who was ill and bedridden.

Eight participants shared about not having adequate resources or means to achieve things that they wanted to do such as finances for the higher education of children or finding a suitable spouse for their children. These were challenging times for the participants, often leaving them feeling desperate and helpless, but when they looked back they felt that these challenges made them stronger and more resilient.

Six of the older women had been restricted by their husbands and in laws. They were well provided for but were prevented from being independent and self-reliant. They were very dependent on their husbands for everything and were trying to
be more independent now after his death. This was a difficult phase for them. They learnt to accept and found alternative way to pursue their goals.

On a personal basis, eighty percent of the older adults had learnt to be more accepting of the situation, they valued the importance of forgiveness, were grateful for the help and blessings they received, had learnt to take the initiative to do things for themselves and were more accommodative. All of them felt that at least in a small way they needed to share their experiences, values and life’s lessons with the next generation.

The third research question investigated the strategies they adopted to cope with the changes that occurred in the process of development of psychological capital. The participants had their share of sorrows, hardships and difficulties right through their lifespan. The critical incidents that they had to cope with were illness and death of parents, a few of them lost their spouses at a young age; some of them had difficult marriages; financial problems; after marriage, relocating and adjusting to a new country or a different state; illness of spouse and children; retirement; an occasional problem with a sibling or a difficult child; and trying to come to terms with their children leaving home after marriage or for higher studies. These critical incidents in a way acted as a catalyst for them to develop their inner strength.

In spite of all the difficulties, challenges and at times struggling to survive, they were able to cope effectively. All the older adults shared how lonely and distressing it was to come to terms with the death of their spouses’. It took them a while and with the support from family and close friends they slowly began to rebuild their lives. Four of the older women had financial difficulties and had to take up jobs in order to take care of their children and the home.
Results indicated that ninety percent out of the participants grew in wisdom and spirituality as a result of the hardships and struggles they experienced. They found solace in prayer and meditation. Their deep trust and faith in God helped them believe that God knew best and to accept ‘His Will’ in their lives.

Sixty percent of them felt inadequate, incapable and inferior. But they were determined to do their best and hard work and perseverance saw them through. In eighty percent of the accounts, it was found that the experiences of the participants in the face of trials and tribulations both at home and at work made them stronger, independent and resilient.

Midlife was the time when their family duties seemed to take up most of their time. They were preoccupied with bringing up and educating their children, instilling in them the right values; while stressing the importance of education and hard work. They had to care for ailing and bedridden parents, balance finances, perform at work and still have enough energy and enthusiasm to begin the next day. Life was a rollercoaster ride.

They learnt to be patient and understanding; and prayer and hard work gave them the strength and determination to move on. Ninety percent of the participants took extra care of their health and were determined not to be a burden to their children; until their dying day they wanted to be physically and financially independent.

Religion and spirituality influenced their thinking and perspective to life in a big way. They stressed the importance of hard work, integrity, discipline, honesty, self-control and fear of God. They were grateful for family and friends; and valued life and relationships. Their experiences had helped them become down to earth and spiritually rich.
As the older adults advanced in age their faith in God increased. They were able to be resilient, hopeful, optimistic and grateful because of their deep spirituality. They were confident that they could turn to God when every other option failed.

Though they had aches and pains they were still energetic and enthusiastic and cherished things in life that they had earlier taken for granted. Four participants shared that they had learnt to forgive, their hearts were free of grudges and this is what kept them happy and peaceful.

In conclusion, it was interesting to note that most of the participants were optimistic and enthusiastic older adults and this positive attitude helped them to face struggles and difficulties with hope and courage. They still felt young and energetic in spite of all the trials and challenges experienced by them at different stages in their lives. In the process of life’s journey, they had developed a profound spirituality that helped them stay strong and resilient in challenging situations.

**Implications of the Study**

*Implications for older adults.* By understanding the experiences of older adults this study has implications for promoting a positive and healthy attitude towards older adults. Older adults themselves can get an insight into their own twilight years; the accounts and narratives can be an inspiration and motivation for them to learn ways in which they can turn their challenging experiences into strengths in order to help them move forward with hope and courage.

We may not be able to generalize the role of social support in old age, the way it has come up in this study; but since from the literature we know that social support is a strong indicator of support and solace, therefore that can be generalized.
Caregivers. This study has given older adults a chance to communicate their feelings about ageing. This could help family and caregivers understand and modify their attitude towards older adults; from considering them as a burden to seeing ageing as another phase of life and appreciating the resources that older adults have to offer. It will be useful in sensitising the family and caregivers as they plan strategies integrated into caregiving, at home and in institutions; to improve the quality of the lives of older adults and in enhancing a smooth transition as they move into their twilight years.

An ongoing study in Brisbane indicates that researchers are exploring the feasibility of transmitting positivity from health care professionals to older adults to boost their health. The study aims to find ways to measure psychological capital and to develop training programmes for caregivers of older individuals. They believe that if their staff learns to be strong and resilient and are able to reach out to the older adults in their care, they will be able to improve the quality of care provided to them (Larkins, 2015).

A similar study could be relevant and useful in the Indian context. There is also a need to explore PsyCap and ageing in India.

Positive psychology. Positive psychology focuses on enhancing a positive state in a person and not just alleviating stressors or reduction of negative states. Having evidence of this and having real life accounts or narratives could support the field and promote further research in the area of gerontology. This will help in promoting a positive and healthy attitude towards older adults and in the process alleviate distress and enhance positive coping.
Changing family system and social system. This study would help to ensure that older adults are taken care of, their needs are recognized and the services provided to them cater to their age and their developmental needs.

Planning interventions. When planning interventions, participant narratives could be useful to create an awareness as they give first-hand indications about the experiences of older adults. This could help in problem focused coping or existential therapy, where life experiences seem to be a catalyst. It could also help in providing some kind of psychosocial support for older adults living with family, or those who live in an assisted, community or residential care.

According to Zeng and Gu (2017), in the past few years researchers have proposed that being mindful of the present, helps to improve positive affect in older adults. Positive affect is when a person feels enthusiastic, alert and active, which results in psychological and physical benefits for older adults. Research also shows that mindfulness intervention programmes, help reduce stress and in turn increases optimism. This has helped to enhance and promote positive affect in older adults. With this in mind Zeng and Gu (2017) explored the ‘relationship between mindfulness and positive affect in Chinese older adults’ with optimism as a mediator. Results of their study indicated that there was a significant relationship between optimism, mindfulness and positive affect. Therefore, since enhancing mindfulness levels in older adults’ results in them being more optimistic, then this can be used as an effective intervention to improve positive affect, promote self-compassion, develop a peaceful mind, enhance quality of life and increase happiness in Indian older adults.

A report can also be shared with the state and central governments so as to enable policy makers plan adequate and effective old age benefits for older individuals.
Limitations of the Study

The sampling procedure adopted for the study brought out certain limitations. The researcher chose participants who had lost their spouse at least a year ago. It was noted that some spouses had passed away 10 to 15 years ago, while others were much less. Therefore, coping with and after the death of the spouse could have been different for the participants depending on the number of years the spouse had passed away.

Because of the language barrier the researcher had to choose all English speaking older adults. As a result, people who could have fulfilled the criteria but were not fluent in English could not be a part of the study.

This study looked at retrospective accounts, based on their memory and reconstruction of it. This is an inherent issue in all phenomenological studies. Participants spoke about an experience that has occurred and how they make sense of it in the present, but this narration may be different from what they might have experienced at that time.

Directions for Future Research

This study aimed at understanding the experiences of older adults which have contributed to the development of psychological capital and the conditions that facilitated and challenged positive ageing. There are other areas that could be researched and that could benefit older adults. A large fraction of older adults are living either in a home for the elderly or alone at home without the support of immediate family. It would be interesting to explore the life experiences and the coping styles of these older adults. Since this study has specifically chosen older adults who have lost a spouse, research could be done on older adults in different life
situations such as older couples who are living together with and without the support of family. Since gender and cultural differences were not taken into consideration for this study, this could be considered for future research.

The researcher selected participants according to a certain sampling criteria. It would be beneficial to explore the experiences of older adults who are living in different conditions other than the ones chosen for this sample, such as older individuals with a physical disability or those dependent on the family financially or psychologically.

A multigenerational study with similar objectives could also be conducted, so as to understand the experiences and viewpoints of not just the older adults, but also their children along with their spouses and grandchildren. A study conducted on a larger group of older adults and their families could give more insight into the benefits of social support and transmission of family values and beliefs since this is an important aspect of Indian families.

Research could also explore if living with family has more meaning for older adults than when living in the community. A longitudinal study would help trace the development and experiences of older adults over a period of time. Since there is no specific theory of psychological capital for older adults, the Grounded theory approach could be adopted so as to allow an in-depth understanding of the experiences of older adults. An appropriate Indian sample that can help build a theory would be beneficial. Lastly, cross-cultural studies on older adults from other states in India could give valuable insights on their experiences; this information could be useful to bring about policies and schemes that could benefit older adults.