

SENSE OF PURPOSE, COPING STYLES, AND PERCEIVED SOCIETAL ATTITUDES AS PREDICTORS OF MENTAL WELLBEING AMONG RETIREES IN AKWA IBOM STATE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the extent which sense of purpose, coping styles and perceived societal attitudes predict mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The objectives of the study were to predict how sense of purpose, coping styles and perceived societal attitude predicts the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State. Three research questions and three null hypotheses were raised and formulated respectively for the study. The ex-post facto survey design was used for the study. The population of the study consisted of 28,898 state government retirees in Akwa Ibom State as at April 2025. A sample size of 709 retirees was used for the study. Multi-stage sampling procedure involving random sampling and purposive sampling techniques were adopted for the study. Data were collected using a researcher developed instrument named, "Personal-Social Variables and Retirees' Mental Wellbeing Questionnaire" (PSVRMWQ). The instrument was subjected to face validity by three experts. The reliability of the PSVRMWQ was .90, determined using Cronbach's Alpha Statistics. Data were analysed using mean, standard deviation, independent t-test and simple linear regression. The null hypotheses were tested at 0.05 level of significance. The finding revealed that sense of purpose, coping and perceived societal attitude is a significant independent predictor of mental wellbeing. It was concluded based on the findings that the mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State is significantly influenced by their sense of ongoing purpose, their ability to employ effective coping strategies, and their perception of being valued by society. It was recommended among others that Counsellors should develop and facilitate purpose-enhancement and mental health workshops for pre-retirees and retirees.

Keywords: Mental Wellbeing, Sense of Purpose, Coping Styles, Perceived Societal Attitude, and Retirees

Introduction

Retirement is the formal cessation of one's professional career, typically upon reaching a predetermined age or after completing a specified period of service. In Nigeria, the statutory retirement age is generally 60 years or after 35 years of continuous service, whichever comes first, though variations exist based on specific sectors and state regulations (Bassey, 2023). Transitioning into retirement generally necessitates significant adjustments, as individuals shift from structured professional routines to a more unstructured daily life. This change can impact various aspects of wellbeing, including mental health, which the World Health Organization (WHO) (2020) defines as "a state in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to contribute to his or her community."

Mental wellbeing encompasses an individual's emotional, psychological, and social health, influencing how people think, feel, act, handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. It is not just about avoiding mental illness but also includes having positive thoughts, emotional stability, and a sense of purpose. Personal-social variables are individual characteristics or attributes that differentiate individuals and influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours across various situations (Gardner & Davis 2013). Santrock (2021) supports the view that personal factors can interact with social elements to determine an individual's quality of life, particularly in old age. In

this study, sense of purpose, coping styles, and personal perception of societal attitudes have been isolated for investigation as key determinants of retirees' mental wellbeing.

A sense of purpose refers to the feeling that one's life has direction, meaning, and worthwhile goals that guide actions and decisions - the inner awareness that what one does in life matters, not only personally but often in relation to others or to a larger contribution to society. Steger (2017) describes it as the feeling that one's life still has meaning, direction, and value even after withdrawal from active employment. Contemporary researchers describe purpose as a central component of eudaimonic wellbeing, defined as the inner conviction that one still has goals to pursue and roles to fulfil (Kim et al., 2021). Among retirees, a sustained sense of purpose has been linked to better emotional stability, reduced loneliness, and stronger life satisfaction (Hill & Turiano, 2018). In the context of Akwa Ibom State, many retirees remain active in church leadership, community associations, mentoring relationships, and small-scale economic activities, making it imperative to empirically ascertain how these engagements impact their mental wellbeing.

Coping styles refer to the cognitive and behavioural strategies individuals adopt to manage stress and adapt to challenges. Modern psychological literature distinguishes between problem-focused coping, which targets the source of stress, and emotion-focused coping, which manages emotional responses (Folkman, 2017; Taylor, 2020). Studies consistently show that effective coping in older adults predicts resilience and psychological stability (Cheng et al., 2020). Retirees often confront stressors such as declining health, reduced income, changing family expectations, and loss of work identity. Within the cultural environment of Akwa Ibom State, retirees commonly rely on religious faith, community solidarity, group membership, and extended family support as culturally grounded coping strategies, making it needful to understand the mental wellbeing of retirees with various coping styles.

Personal perception of societal attitude describes retirees' subjective interpretation of how society views, values, and responds to older adults, including perceptions of respect, inclusion, recognition, and fairness from family members, communities, governments, and the wider public. Some authors suggest that retirees who perceive society as appreciative and supportive tend to experience higher self-esteem and autonomy (Ng & Feldman, 2015; He et al., 2022). Conversely, perceptions of neglect, marginalisation, or age-related discrimination have been associated with reduced life satisfaction and feelings of social exclusion (Swift et al., 2017). In societies like Akwa Ibom State, which is experiencing changing economic conditions and the gradual weakening of traditional family structures, these dynamics could shape retirees' perceptions of how they are valued, affecting their overall mental wellbeing.

As emphasised by the World Health Organization (2021), ensuring a holistic approach to ageing is essential for promoting mental health among retirees. However, observations within the community reveal that many retirees experience psychological challenges during this transition, struggling with feelings of loneliness, loss of purpose, anxiety about financial security, and difficulties adapting to a less structured lifestyle. While retirement is often expected to bring rest and satisfaction after years of service, the reality for many retirees can include emotional distress and reduced life satisfaction if adequate support systems are not available.

This study therefore aims to investigate how sense of purpose, coping styles, and personal perception of societal attitudes influence the mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria, with a view to understanding the specific psychosocial mechanisms that promote or hinder positive mental health outcomes in retirement and inform culturally relevant counselling interventions.

Statement of the Problem

Retirement represents a crucial stage in human development, marked by major shifts in psychological adjustment, social interaction, and personal identity. In Akwa Ibom State, many retirees encounter difficulties such as weakened family support systems, negative societal attitudes, and loss of work-related identity, which often translate into heightened vulnerability to stress, depression, social isolation, and loss of self-worth. As a counselling psychologist and keen observer of retirees' life realities in the study area, the researcher has noted that while some navigate retirement successfully by maintaining purposeful engagement and adaptive coping strategies, many others face severe emotional struggles that threaten their mental wellbeing. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) indicated that over 60% of Nigerian retirees experience post-retirement mental health challenges, highlighting the reality that the transition from active employment to retirement is not always smooth. These observable challenges, coupled with reports in literature linking sense of purpose, coping mechanisms, and societal perceptions to psychological outcomes in old age, prompted the need to systematically examine how these personal-social variables shape the mental wellbeing of retirees in this context.

Several efforts have been made at national and state levels to address retirees' welfare through pension reforms and healthcare initiatives. However, these interventions tend to neglect the broader psychosocial dimensions of aging, including retirees' need for sustained purpose, adaptive coping resources, and positive societal recognition. If the mental wellbeing of retirees remains poor due to such lopsided interventions, this could pose significant challenges not only to the individuals but also to society at large. Unfortunately, most studies in Nigeria have primarily highlighted economic hardship as a retirement challenge, with limited focus on how purpose, coping styles, and perceived societal attitudes influence mental wellbeing. This study, therefore, seeks to fill this critical gap by examining differences in mental wellbeing of retirees based on sense of purpose, coping styles, and personal perception of societal attitudes

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of this study is to examine personal-social variables and mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The specific objectives of this study include to determine:

- i. How sense of purpose predicts the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.
- ii. How coping styles predicts the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.
- iii. How perceived societal attitude predicts the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.

Research Questions

The following research questions were answered in the study:

- i. To what extent does sense of purpose predict the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State?
- ii. To what extent does coping styles predict the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State?
- iii. To what extent does perceive societal attitude predict the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State?

Research Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in this work at .05 level of significance:

- H₀ 1. Sense of purpose does not significantly influence the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.
- H₀ 2. Coping styles does not significantly influence the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.

H₀ 3. Perceived societal attitude not significantly influence the mental well-being of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.

Literature Review

The theoretical foundation for examining sense of purpose, coping styles, and perceived societal attitudes in relation to retirees' mental wellbeing is grounded in two relevant frameworks: Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and the stress process model by Pearlin et al. Erikson's (1950) theory posits that late adulthood is characterised by the psychosocial crisis of integrity versus despair, wherein sense of purpose directly contributes to achieving fulfilment, while successful resolution of this crisis depends on adaptive coping and positive perceptions of being valued by society. Complementing this, Pearlin et al.'s (1981) stress process model explains how retirement-related stressors are mediated by psychological resources such as sense of purpose, coping strategies, and individuals' interpretation of their social environment, with perceived societal attitudes shaping whether retirees view societal responses as supportive or threatening. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how sense of purpose, coping styles, and perceived societal attitudes collectively influence the mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State.

Empirical evidence on sense of purpose and mental wellbeing among older adults has been documented in various contexts. Kashefi et al. (2022) found that economic security and social engagement crucially influence overall wellbeing, with dimensions of psychological wellbeing heavily correlated with positive life appraisal and social support systems. Lawton et al. (2024) investigated how sources of meaning in life and goal setting behaviours influenced wellbeing among retirees during the Corona Virus Disease 2019 pandemic in Australia, finding that both greater sources of meaning in life and higher levels of playfulness significantly predicted higher levels of wellbeing, with playfulness moderating the negative effects of retirement goal disruption. Similarly, Rahman et al. (2025) indicated that COVID-19 restrictions disrupted engagement in community and religious activities tied to elders' sense of purpose and social connection, leading to increased feelings of purposelessness and detachment. While these studies underscore the importance of purpose for mental wellbeing, they were either conducted in high-income contexts or lacked quantitative measures of purpose. The present study fills this gap by systematically measuring and analysing sense of purpose as an independent variable influencing retirees' mental wellbeing in Akwa Ibom State.

Research on coping styles and mental health among older adults has yielded consistent findings across cultural contexts. Tse and Fung (2018) found that problem-focused and social-support coping were significantly associated with reduced loneliness and improved mental health, whereas avoidance coping exacerbated feelings of isolation and depressive symptoms among older adults in Hong Kong. Park and Lee (2020) that problem-focused coping significantly buffered the effects of retirement-related stress on anxiety and depression among retirees in South Korea. In the Nigerian context, Olaseni and Akinsulore (2022) investigated predictors of coping strategies among older adults experiencing major life transitions in Southwestern Nigeria, finding that adaptive coping strategies were significantly associated with better psychological wellbeing, while maladaptive strategies predicted higher stress levels. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they examined coping as a mediating variable or focused on transitional stress rather than the broader concept of mental wellbeing.

The influence of perceived societal attitudes on older adults' mental health has been examined across African and Western contexts. Smith and Tani (2018) investigated the effects of perceived societal attitudes and social integration on mental health among older adults in the United States, finding that retirees perceiving higher societal respect and social inclusion reported lower depressive symptoms, greater life satisfaction, and better psychological resilience. Kola and Oladeji (2020) examined societal treatment of the elderly and its psychological consequences among older adults in

Lagos and Ogun States, revealing that older adults who perceived higher societal respect reported better mental health outcomes, while those experiencing neglect or ageist treatment exhibited higher psychological distress. Osei-Tutu and Peprah (2020) found that perceived negative societal attitudes and internalised ageism were significantly correlated with higher depressive symptoms and reduced life satisfaction. Furthermore, Emem and Ekanem (2021) conducted a study on spirituality, societal support, and mental health among older adults in Akwa Ibom State, finding that older adults perceiving higher societal support through community recognition, family respect, and church involvement reported better mental health, while those feeling excluded or undervalued experienced higher psychological distress. However, this study did not explicitly measure "perceived societal attitudes" as a distinct variable but used the closely related concept of societal support. The present study builds on this foundation by operationalising perceived societal attitudes independently and examining its impact on the mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State, considering both positive and negative perceptions.

Methods

This study utilised the ex-post facto survey design. The population of this study comprises all State Government retirees in Akwa Ibom State. According to Sunday (2025), 28,898 retirees were listed for verification under the payroll of the state government as of April 2025. The sample for the study was 790 retirees obtained using Taro Yamane’s (1967) formula, which was initially calculated as 395 and then doubled giving 790 for higher generalization. However, out of the retirees sampled, only 709 responses were deemed valid. The multi stage sampling technique was utilised in sample selection.

The researcher-made questionnaire tagged Personal-Social Variables and Retirees’ Mental Wellbeing Scale (PSVRMWS) was used for data collection in this study. The research instrument was face-validated by three experts, one from the Department of Psychological Foundations of Education, and two from the Department of Guidance and Counselling, University of Uyo, Uyo. The instrument yielded an internal consistency reliability coefficient .90 Cronbach’s Alpha. The data collected in this study were analysed using Mean, Standard deviation, independent t-test and Simple linear regression statistical tools. All hypotheses were tested at 0.05 alpha level of significance. The study adhered to established ethical guidelines to ensure that the rights, dignity, and welfare of the participants were protected throughout the research process.

Results

Research Question 1: To what extent does sense of purpose predict mental wellbeing of retirees?

Table 1: Simple Linear Regression Analysis of sense of purpose and mental wellbeing of retirees (n=709)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Adjusted R ²
Sense of purpose				
Mental wellbeing of retirees	0.858	0.737	73.7%	0.736

In Table 1, the R-value of 0.858 indicates positive and very high extent of prediction, while R² value of 0.737 which is the coefficient of determination show the extent sense of purpose predict mental wellbeing of retirees. In addition, 73.7% variance in mental wellbeing of retirees is accounted for by sense of purpose. This means that the extent sense of purpose predict mental wellbeing of retirees is very high.

Research Question 2: To what extent does coping styles predict mental wellbeing of retirees?**Table 2:** Simple Linear Regression Analysis of copy styles and mental wellbeing of retirees (n=709)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Adjusted R ²
Coping styles				
Mental wellbeing of retirees	0.480	0.231	23.1%	0.230

In Table 2, the R-value of 0.480 indicates positive and moderate extent of prediction, while R² value of 0.231 which is the coefficient of determination show the extent coping styles predict mental wellbeing of retirees. In addition, 23.1% variance in mental wellbeing of retirees is accounted for by coping styles. This means that the extent coping styles predict mental wellbeing of retirees is moderate.

Research Question 3: To what extent does perceive societal attitude predict mental wellbeing of retirees?**Table 3:** Simple Linear Regression Analysis of perceived societal attitude and mental wellbeing of retirees (n=709)

Variables	R	R ²	Extent of Prediction	Adjusted R ²
Perceived societal attitude				
Mental wellbeing of retirees	0.834	0.696	69.6%	0.696

In Table 3, the R-value of 0.834 indicates positive and moderate extent of prediction, while R² value of 0.696 which is the coefficient of determination show the extent perceived societal attitude predict mental wellbeing of retirees. In addition, 69.6% variance in mental wellbeing of retirees is accounted for by perceived societal attitude. This means that the extent perceived societal attitude predict mental wellbeing of retirees is very high.

Hypothesis 1: Sense of purpose does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees.

Table 4: Simple regression analysis of the prediction of mental wellbeing of retirees from Sense of purpose (n=709)

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	543.928	1	543.928	1979.066*	.000
Residual	194.312	707	.275		
Total	738.240	708			

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
(Constant)	.101	.322		.313	.754
Sense of purpose	1.087	.024	.858	44.487	.000

The information in Table 4 shows that sense of purpose is a significant independent predictor of mental wellbeing (F= 1979.066; p=0.000). Hence, the null hypothesis that sense of purpose does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis 2: Coping styles does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees.

Table 5: Simple regression analysis of the prediction of mental wellbeing of retirees from coping styles (n=709)

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	170.378	1	170.378	212.125*	.000
Residual	567.86	707	.803		
Total	738.240	708			

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
(Constant)	9.432	.343		27.515	.000
Sense of purpose	.384	.026	.480	14.565	.000

The information in Table 5 shows that coping styles is a significant independent predictor of mental wellbeing (F= 212.125; p=0.000). Hence, the null hypothesis that coping styles does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived societal attitude does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees.

Table 6: Simple regression analysis of the prediction of mental wellbeing of retirees from perceived societal attitude (n=709)

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	Df	MS	F-ratio	p-value
Regression	513.834	1	513.834	1618.852*	.000
Residual	224.406	707	.317		
Total	738.240	708			

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	p-value
(Constant)	.885	.337		2.628	.009
Perceived societal attitude	1.028	.026	.834	40.235	.000

The information in Table 6 shows that perceived societal attitude is a significant independent predictor of mental wellbeing (F= 1618.852; p=0.000). Hence, the null hypothesis that perceived societal attitude does not significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees is rejected at 0.05 level of significance.

Discussion of the findings

The finding from research question one revealed that the extent sense of purpose predicts mental wellbeing of retirees is very high. Also, the result of hypothesis one showed that sense of purpose significantly predicts mental wellbeing of retirees. This finding agrees with Lawton *et al.*, (2024) who found that both greater sources of meaning in life and higher levels of playfulness significantly predicted higher levels of wellbeing among retirees. The finding also supports Rahman *et al.*, (2025) who highlighted that inability to attend church and social gatherings led to increased feelings of purposelessness and detachment among older adults in Nigeria. The result may be attributed to the fundamental human need for direction that becomes even more critical when the external structure of work is removed. During their working years, public servants in Akwa Ibom did not need to ask themselves why they got out of bed each morning. The answer was obvious. There was work to do, people to see, tasks to complete. Purpose was built into the structure of each day. But retirement removes that structure, and with it, the automatic answer to the question of why. Retirees must now construct purpose for themselves, or they must discover that purpose was never

really about work at all. Those who succeed in finding new sources of meaning maintain their mental wellbeing. Those who do not drift into the emptiness that precedes depression. Sense of purpose operates as a psychological anchor in the storm of retirement transitions. When a retiree knows what they are living for, daily decisions become clearer. Time is organized around what matters. Energy is directed toward meaningful ends. Without purpose, days blur together. There is no reason to choose one activity over another because no activity carries particular weight. This lack of direction is not neutral. It is actively damaging to mental health because it signals to the mind that nothing really matters.

The finding from research question two revealed that the extent coping styles predict mental wellbeing of retirees is moderate. Also, the result of hypothesis two showed that coping styles significantly predict mental wellbeing of retirees. This finding agrees with Olaseni and Akinsulore (2022) who found that adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving, social support seeking, and religious coping were significantly associated with better psychological wellbeing among older adults in Southwestern Nigeria. The finding also supports Tse and Fung (2018) who reported that problem-focused and social-support coping were significantly associated with reduced loneliness and improved mental health among older adults. The result may be attributed to the reality that retirement inevitably brings challenges that cannot be avoided. Health declines. Income reduces. Loved ones pass away. Roles change. These are not possibilities but certainties of aging. What varies is not whether these challenges occur but how retirees respond to them. Coping styles are the tools retirees bring to this work of responding. Some tools build toward mental wellbeing. Others undermine it. The difference between a retiree who thrives and one who struggles is often not the weight of their burdens but the effectiveness of their coping strategies.

The finding from research question three revealed that the extent perceived societal attitude predicts mental wellbeing of retirees is very high, accounting for 69.6 percent of the variance. Also, the result of hypothesis three showed that perceived societal attitude significantly predicts mental wellbeing of retirees. This finding agrees with Emem and Ekanem (2021) who found that older adults perceiving higher societal support through community recognition, family respect, and church involvement reported better mental health in Akwa Ibom State. The finding also supports Kola and Oladeji (2020) who reported that older adults who perceived higher societal respect reported better mental health outcomes, including lower anxiety and depressive symptoms. The result may be attributed to the deeply social nature of human identity. No person, regardless of age, constructs their sense of self in isolation. We learn who we are through the eyes of others. When those eyes reflect respect and value, we internalize that respect. When they reflect disregard or contempt, we internalize that too. For retirees in Akwa Ibom, the transition out of formal employment brings with it a new vulnerability to how society sees them. No longer defined by job titles or institutional roles, they must find new sources of social recognition. Whether they find these sources shapes their mental wellbeing profoundly. Retirees who perceive that society values them carry a psychological shield against many of the challenges of aging. When a retired teacher is greeted as "Ma" or "Sir" by former students, that greeting carries more than politeness. It carries confirmation that their work mattered, that they are remembered, that their contribution continues to be recognized. These interactions deposit psychological resources that can be drawn on during difficult times. They are not mere pleasantries but essential nourishment for the aging self.

Conclusion

It was concluded based on the findings that the mental wellbeing of retirees in Akwa Ibom State is significantly influenced by their sense of ongoing purpose, their ability to employ effective coping strategies, and their perception of being valued by society. These findings confirm that retirement is not merely a financial transition but a profound psychological journey requiring support,

understanding, and intervention from counsellors, families, communities, and government, with particular attention to fostering meaningful engagement opportunities for retirees, promoting adaptive coping skills through counselling interventions, and cultivating positive societal attitudes toward ageing populations through community education and intergenerational programmes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Counsellors should develop and facilitate purpose-enhancement and mental health workshops for pre-retirees and retirees.
2. The Counselling Association of Nigeria should organize advocacy campaigns aimed at raising awareness among retirees about cultivating a sense of purpose.
3. Families should be educated through public awareness campaigns about their critical role in retiree mental health.
4. The state government should engage counsellors within the pension's board to educate retirees on effective coping strategies that enhance their mental wellbeing.
5. The Ministry of Education should collaborate with counsellors and curriculum planners, to integrate retirement preparation into adult education curricula, ensuring that public servants receive psychological preparation for retirement alongside financial planning.

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