

Cultural and Communication Challenges Faced by Older Adults after Natural Disasters in Türkiye

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Abstract

Background: This study examines the role of cultural dynamics and communication in the post-disaster recovery of older adults following the February 6th Kahramanmaraş earthquake. Aim: The study aims to explore how cultural values and communication shape the recovery processes of older adults residing in the earthquake zone following the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquake on February 6, 2023. Methodology: Adopting a qualitative research design, in-depth interviews were conducted with participants aged 65 and over who experienced the earthquake firsthand, and the data were analyzed in MAXQDA. Findings: The study revealed that cultural values, traditional forms of solidarity, and community-based communication contributed to post-earthquake recovery processes of older adults. Family ties and neighborhood relationships, in particular, were found to make significant contributions to the recovery process. The study showed that cultural values, religious rituals, and social support were positively associated with older adults' communication styles during the post-earthquake recovery process. This indicates the need to develop post-disaster support policies that take cultural contexts into account. Conclusion: The findings demonstrate that the recovery process for older adults is multidimensional, shaped by cultural values, belief systems, and communication. To ensure sustained recovery and reduce the vulnerability of older adults, culturally sensitive interventions, inclusive social support structures encompassing all segments of society, and comprehensive disaster education programs are necessary. Accordingly, it is recommended that the cultural and social needs of elderly individuals be prioritized in the aftermath of a disaster.

Anahtar Kelimeler:

February 6 Earthquake • Older Adults • Disaster Communication • Culture • Türkiye

The Effects of Digitalization on Informal Older People Care Labor: A Literature-Based Assessment

Özet

Arka plan: Bu araştırma, 6 Şubat Kahramanmaraş depreminin ardından yaşlı bireylerin iyileşme süreçlerinde kültürel dinamiklerin ve iletişimin rolünü incelemektedir. Amaç: Bu araştırmanın amacı, 6 Şubat 2023'te Kahramanmaraş merkezli depremin ardından deprem bölgesinde yaşayan yaşlı bireylerin iyileşme süreçlerinde kültürel değerlerin ve iletişimin nasıl bir rol oynadığını anlamaktır. Metodoloji: Nitel araştırma tasarımıyla yürütülen çalışmada, depremi doğrudan yaşayan 65 yaş ve üzeri katılımcılarla derinlemesine görüşmeler yapılmış ve veriler MAXQDA programı kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Bulgular: Kültürel değerlerin, geleneksel dayanışma biçimlerinin ve topluluk temelli iletişimin yaşlı bireylerin deprem sonrası iyileşme süreçlerini desteklediği ortaya çıkmıştır. Özellikle aile bağları ve komşuluk ilişkilerinin iyileşme süreçlerinde önemli katkılar sunduğu görülmektedir. Kültürel değerlerin, dini ritüellerin ve sosyal desteğin deprem sonrası iyileşme sürecinde yaşlı bireylerin iletişim tarzlarıyla olumlu bir şekilde bağlantılı olduğu gösterilmiştir. Bu durum afet sonrası destek politikalarının kültürel bağlamlar dikkate alınarak oluşturulmasının gerekliliğine işaret etmektedir. Sonuç: Araştırma, yaşlı yetişkinler için iyileşme sürecinin kültürel değerler, inanç sistemleri ve iletişim tarafından şekillendirilen çok boyutlu bir süreç olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Sürekli iyileşmeyi sağlamak ve yaşlı yetişkinlerin kırılganlığını azaltmak için, kültürel normlara duyarlı müdahaleler, toplumun tüm kesimlerini kapsayan dayanışma yapıları ve kapsamlı afet eğitim programları gereklidir. Bu doğrultuda afet sonrasında yaşlı bireylerin kültürel ve sosyal ihtiyaçlarının öncelikli olarak ele alınması önerilmektedir.

Keywords:

6 Şubat Depremi • Yaşlı Bireyler • İletişim • Kültür • Türkiye

Introduction

The February 6th earthquakes in Kahramanmaraş were among the most destructive/devastating disasters in Türkiye's history, directly affecting millions of people. However, not all segments of society are affected equally by disasters; older adults, in particular, are at greater risk in the post-disaster period due to their physical, social, and communication vulnerabilities. This is because disasters not only cause physical destruction but also profoundly affect society's lifestyles, economy, and social relationships. Firat (2022) states that disasters have direct effects not only on physical losses but also on social life. Similarly, Balta and Paker (1999) argue that behind the apparent destruction caused by disasters lie cultural and social factors that affect the social structure. Natural disasters can also cause many negative consequences, disrupting everyday life in the regions where they occur (Ökten Sipahioğlu, 2024: 298). Migration issues, housing problems arising from devastating earthquakes, unmet needs, persistent fear of earthquakes, and difficulties individuals experience in communication processes are some of these problems (Danış, 2024). Following the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş (Türkiye) on February 6, 2023, according to the President of Türkiye's statement in the Post-Earthquake Migration and Human Mobility Assessment Report (2023), 3.3 million people migrated from the earthquake zone, and 800,000 people returned to their villages. It is foreseeable that the social lives of all these people

have been directly affected and are no longer the same.

One of the most common psychological problems following natural disasters such as earthquakes is post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Özdemir & Engin, 2024), and this may lead to a need for long-term psychological and emotional support for people affected by natural disasters. Yıldırım (2023) found that the problems caused by the earthquake varied. Although meeting the material and psychological needs of earthquake victims helped create a safe environment, the persistence of fear discouraged many victims from returning to the affected area. For example, when a natural disaster damages a home environment and valuable possessions, feelings of insecurity can arise in individuals (Bulut, 2023). Therefore, people not only lose their homes, but may also experience many psychological and communication problems, which can affect social life and lead to broken relationships (Şarman & Demir, 2025).

Although natural disasters affect all segments of society, some individuals may be more severely impacted and experience more negative consequences depending on their age, gender, and physical conditions. In particular, the older adults are considered among the disadvantaged/vulnerable groups, vulnerable to the hazards and risks of disasters (2025b, AFAD). Older people are at a higher risk of injury (Çakır & Atalay, 2020). This situation places them among disadvantaged groups (Tezel, 2015). Older individuals are affected differently by disasters than other age groups, not only

because of age-related physical vulnerabilities but also because of differences in access to communication tools, the sustainability of social support networks, and cultural coping mechanisms. Factors such as chronic diseases, mobility limitations, difficulties in using digital communication tools, and social isolation may limit/impede older individuals to access information and aid resources after a disaster. However, life experience, family ties, neighborhood relationships, and cultural values can be considered important protective resources in the post-disaster recovery process for older individuals. Hence, it is important to address the disaster experiences of older individuals not only in terms of their physical vulnerabilities but also in terms of their communicative, social, and cultural dimensions. In particular, cultural structure has a fundamental influence on this process. Culture is central to emotions, thoughts, and behaviors related to natural disasters. Culture emerges as a defense mechanism in times of crisis (Çevirme, 2024), and people take precautions against earthquakes through the social institutions and structures they create and the culture in which they live (Erdoğan, 2023). Older people, in particular, are among the groups most affected by and more vulnerable to disasters due to economic, social, physical, and health-related factors and, as a result, are considered a group that requires more/greater support and has special needs compared to other individuals when performing daily living activities (Çakır & Atalay, 2020).

The older adults, one of the disadvantaged groups in the aftermath of a disaster, struggle to communicate due to the digital divide in the disaster communication process and have difficulty accessing messages, notifications, and using early warning systems (Gibson et al, 2020). While older people generally use traditional media such as television, radio, and face-to-face communication, the need for new technologies makes it difficult for them to obtain information during disasters such as earthquakes (Roy & Bandyopadhyay, 2023). The cultural values of older people directly influence how they access information, and when these are ignored during and after disasters, communication efforts are less likely to be effective (Tanrıverdi, 2024). On the other hand, the challenges faced by the older adults during disasters are not only technological but also social. When social support is not provided to the older adults, combined with communication difficulties, feelings of helplessness, loneliness, and uncertainty increase, and the recovery process is prolonged (Sapçı, 2025). A study conducted on older adults after the earthquake found that family relationships cooled after displacement, they longed for old friendships, and felt lonely in their social circles (Sevim, 2024). Because after a disaster, communication is not merely a technical process for transferring information; it plays a critical role in guiding individuals to safe areas, providing access to basic needs, connecting them with loved ones, and helping them rebuild a sense of psychological security. This is especially true for older individuals. Age-related physical limitations, difficulties in

using digital technologies, and increased reliance on social support networks can make it difficult for older people to access accurate and timely information after a disaster. However, effective communication with family members, neighbors, and local institutions reduces feelings of uncertainty among older individuals, strengthens social support mechanisms, and significantly contributes to post-disaster recovery. Therefore, communication can be considered a fundamental component in shaping social solidarity and psychological well-being in understanding older individuals' disaster experiences.

Because older adults generally have larger social networks than other members of society, their relationships with family, friends, and neighbors are a vital source of support during post-traumatic recovery (Bölükbaşı, 2025). However, in addition to these effects, societal stereotypes about the older adults, as well as factors such as gender and educational level, can reinforce the older age group's vulnerability and lead to significant loss of rights (Duruel & Arık, 2023). Thus, the status of older people within their families, and their social and cultural positions, can influence how this group perceives and responds to emergency support during a disaster (Duruel & Arık, 2023). The post-disaster recovery process encompasses not only addressing physical losses but also helping individuals make sense of their trauma and reintegrate into social life. In this process, cultural values are a key determinant shaping individuals' coping strategies, social support networks, and forms of solidarity. For older individuals in particular, family relationships,

neighborhood ties, religious beliefs, and traditional mutual aid practices can serve as important protective mechanisms in managing feelings of uncertainty and loss. As a consequence, considering the cultural context in understanding the experiences of older individuals after a disaster is crucial for revealing the multifaceted nature of the recovery process.

A significant portion of existing studies focuses on the physical health problems, psychological impacts, or social support needs of older individuals after disasters. However, studies that holistically examine the interrelationships among cultural values, communication experiences, and social support networks during the post-disaster recovery process are limited. There is a particular need for research that examines these experiences together, especially in the context of the February 6th Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. This study examines the combined role of cultural values, communication experiences, and social support networks in the recovery process of older individuals following the February 6th Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. Thus, the study evaluates the experiences of older individuals after the disaster not only from the perspective of physical vulnerability but also within their cultural, communicative, and social contexts. The aim of this research is to understand the role of cultural values and communication in the recovery processes of older people living in the earthquake zone following the Kahramanmaraş-centered earthquake on February 6, 2023. The study investigates which cultural values the older utilized when facing post-earthquake challenges, how they used

their social networks, and how these factors influenced their recovery. Given the challenges faced by the older adults, the study aims to develop recommendations for improving cultural and communication contexts following a disaster. The main and sub-questions of the study are given below.

1. What role do culture and communication play in the post-disaster recovery period of older individuals?
2. How do older adults describe the communication difficulties they experienced during and after the earthquake?
3. How did individuals' cultural ties contribute to their emotional development after the earthquake?
4. What impact did the earthquake have on individuals' beliefs, social relationships, and values?
5. How did neighborly relations, religion, friendship ties, and family structure shape the adaptation process?

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design. Accordingly, a phenomenological design was used to examine people's perceptions. In phenomenological design, people's reactions and perceptions towards a certain phenomenon are examined (Yalçın, 2022). The aim of phenomenological research is to reveal the meaning of universal emotions such as "love", "grief", "fear", and "anger" by delving into the essence of individual experiences (Tutar, 2023). Its main purpose is to analyze the essence and meaning of

an individual's experience (Teherani et al., 2015). The primary reason for choosing a phenomenological approach is to understand the essence of the cultural and communicative experiences of older individuals after the earthquake, from their own perspectives. The research questions were formulated to reveal the meanings participants attributed to their earthquake experiences, how these experiences were reflected in their daily lives, and how they shaped their recovery processes. Data were collected through in-depths interviews. This technique allows participants to engage in reciprocal collaboration and interaction, revealing their perceptions, thought patterns, experiences, and prejudices (Uslu et al., 2023). In this regard, richer data that is difficult to obtain or examine in depth with other research techniques can be obtained through interview techniques. However, due to the different cultural backgrounds of the participants, various difficulties may arise in interpreting the participants' lived experiences (Karahan et al., 2022). Therefore, it is crucial that the researcher has sufficient knowledge of interview techniques, conducts the research process meticulously, and plans all stages in detail (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were preferred for data collection. This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences after the earthquake in detail in their own words. In this study, the researchers focus on revealing the underlying meaning structures of these experiences. The Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK, 2024) defines old age as 65 years and older. Accordingly, the research

group consists of individuals aged 65 and over who personally experienced the Kahramanmaraş earthquake. In the chaotic environment following a disaster, difficulties arise in sharing information, compounded by the lack of communication and coordination among aid teams (Balta et al., 2024).

Population and Sample of the Research

The population of this research consists of older adults who experienced the earthquake centered on Kahramanmaraş on February 6, 2023. Snowball sampling was employed. Snowball sampling consists of events and participants that are added to the research process as it progresses (Özen & Gül, 2007) and it is an effective method for groups with a specific environment that is hard to reach (Naderifar et al., 2017). With this method, participants determined by the researcher suggested suitable participants for the other study, thus creating a chain and expanding the sample. Snowball sampling offers advantages in terms of speed in finding participants, low cost, and a trust-based nature (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018). In this context, a container city was established in Kahramanmaraş after the earthquake, where earthquake survivor lived. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling by interviewing earthquake victims. To this end, volunteers aged 65 and older were interviewed. A total of 25 participants were interviewed: 9 female and 16 males. In-depth interviews were conducted with older adults to better analyze their post-earthquake problems and experiences. These interviews provided insights into individuals' social

relationships, cultural values, and communication.

Information on Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The 25 participants in the study were older adults aged between 65 and 91. Nine of the participants were female, and sixteen were male. Fifteen participants were from the central districts and ten from the districts. Eighteen of the participants were married, and seven were widowed. Regarding education levels, fifteen had primary and secondary school degrees, while ten had high school degrees. All of the women are housewives, and all of the men are retired.

Inclusion Criteria for the Study

- Being 65 years of age or older
- Having directly experienced the February 6, 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquake
- Residing in Kahramanmaraş
- Participating voluntarily in the study
- Participants must declare that they do not have any serious physical or psychological health problems that would prevent them from participating in the research and in-depth interviews. (This criterion was not determined using any clinical assessment, psychological test, or standardized scale; it was based on participants' self-reports and the researcher's observations of their communication skills prior to the interview).

Exclusion Criteria of the Study

- Failure to comply with the purpose of the study and inclusion criteria

Data Collection Process

Interviews were conducted in neighborhoods and container cities in Kahramanmaraş between May 15 and June 10, 2025. As part of the research, interviews were conducted with 25 older adults affected by the earthquake in Kahramanmaraş. Audio recordings were made with participants' permission and later transcribed. All participants provided consent before participating in the research, and the study was conducted in accordance with ethical guidelines. Interviews lasted approximately 60-75 minutes.

Interviews were conducted individually by the researcher using a semi-structured interview form. During the interviews, as needed, probing questions were asked to encourage participants to elaborate on their accounts. All interviews were conducted in quiet environments where participants felt comfortable. With the participants' consent, audio recordings were made and transcribed after the interview.

Data Analysis

Although a phenomenological design was adopted in the research, the thematic analysis approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the data. The data obtained in the research were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach in accordance with the phenomenological research design. Thematic analysis is a flexible qualitative analysis method that aims to systematically reveal shared patterns of meaning in participants' lives. During the analysis, interview recordings were first transcribed

and imported into MAXQDA 2020. The texts were then read multiple times by the researchers to identify meaningful expressions, and open coding was performed. The resulting codes were grouped into categories based on conceptual similarities, which were then compared in line with the research questions and participants' experiences and structured under overarching themes. Throughout the analysis, the relationships among codes, categories, and themes were continuously reviewed and reorganized as needed to finalize the thematic structure. The focus in creating the codes and themes was on uncovering shared meanings that reflected the essence of the participants' experiences. In the final stage, the relationships between themes, categories, and codes were presented through diagrams using MAXQDA's visualization tools. When interpreting the findings, not only were the participants' experiences described, but the meanings they attributed to these experiences were also considered. Thus, the experiences of elderly individuals regarding fear, communication difficulties, and cultural solidarity after the earthquake were evaluated within the framework of shared meaning structures, with the aim of understanding the essence of the phenomenon.

In the theme development process, not only the frequency of code repetition but also the conceptual integrity of the codes and their relationship to the research questions were considered. Related codes were grouped into the same category, and similar categories were combined into overarching themes that holistically

explained the participants' experiences after the earthquake. Furthermore, the process involved continuous feedback between the coding and theme development phases. Newly generated codes were compared with the existing dataset, similar codes were merged, differing codes were rearranged, and the compatibility of the themes with the data was continuously checked. This cyclical process ensured that the themes reflected not only recurring expressions but also the common meaning structures that participants attributed to their earthquake experiences. As a result of the analysis, three main themes were identified: Earthquake and Emotions, Earthquake and Communication, and Earthquake and Culture, with relevant categories and codes structured under these themes.

In the code map shown in the figure, the font size and thickness of the codes vary according to their frequency of use. Codes displayed in bold, large fonts occur more frequently in the dataset, while codes displayed in thin, small fonts occur less frequently. The lines between the codes indicate their relationships and co-occurrence.

Trustworthiness (Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability and Transferability)

To ensure the reliability of the research, the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were considered. To increase the credibility of the research, in-depth interviews were conducted with the participants, and all interviews were audio-recorded and

transcribed with the participants' consent. During the analysis process, the researchers read the interview transcripts multiple times, continuously reviewed codes, categories, and themes, and took care to ensure that the findings accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Furthermore, the findings section directly included participant statements to support the interpretations made with the data.

The research was supported by detailed reporting of the dependability, sample selection, data collection process, coding, category creation, and theme development stages. MAXQDA 2020 software was used to organize, systematically code, compare, and visualize the data. However, MAXQDA was used not as a tool to reduce researcher bias, but as a qualitative data analysis software that supports the systematic and transparent conduct of the analysis process.

Within the scope of the confirmability analysis, the codes and themes generated throughout the process were continuously compared with the interview transcripts, ensuring that the interpretations were grounded in the participants' narratives. Aware that their own preconceptions might influence data interpretation, the researchers adopted a reflective approach during analysis, striving to present the meanings participants attributed to their experiences as accurately as possible from their own perspectives.

The transferability of the research was supported by a detailed explanation of the context in which the research was conducted, the characteristics of the

participants, the sampling method, the data collection process, and the analysis stage. This allowed for the evaluation of the research findings in different samples with similar characteristics. To increase reliability, the following were adopted as key quality strategies: audio recording, verbatim transcripts of interviews, repeated readings of data, continuous comparison of codes and themes, the use of direct participant quotations, and detailed reporting of the analysis process.

Ethics committee approval for this study was granted by the Social and Human Sciences Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Committee of Necmettin Erbakan University (Türkiye) with the Meeting/Decision number 10 2025/467 dated 16.05.2025.

Results and Discussion

The study included 25 participants, all older individuals aged 65-91. The age distribution was as follows: 6 participants were 65 years old; 2 were 66; 2 were 69; 2 were 70; 1 each was 71, 72, 73, and 74; 4 were 75; 2 were 77; and 1 each was 80, 84, 89, and 91. Nine participants were women, and 16 were men. Fifteen participants came from central districts and ten from other districts. Eighteen participants were married, and seven were widowed. Regarding education level, 15 were primary and secondary school graduates, and 10 were high school graduates. All women were housewives, and all men were retired. Three participants (two women and one man) were found to be living alone. Regarding housing conditions after the earthquake, 12 participants lived in container settlements, and 5 lived in

tents. Additionally, 12 participants lost their homes after the earthquake. Furthermore, it was found that 2 participants were trapped under rubble, 1 participant sustained physical injuries, and 7 participants lost at least one close relative or family member due to the earthquake.

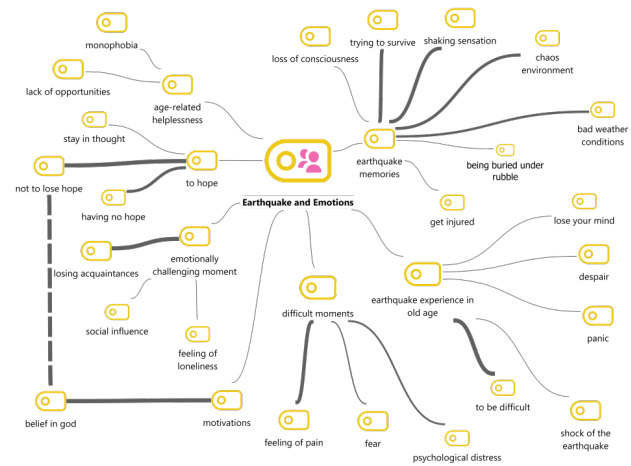


Figure 1: Earthquake and Emotions

P16: "Of course, we never lost hope in God. You can't lose hope in God. It was easier, you know. It was easier because I believed in God".

P15: "When I lose my loved ones, I get sad. I struggle. I don't think about myself, I think about those younger than me, my grandchildren. They're so tiny".

P10: "When I lose my loved ones, I get sad. I struggle. I don't think about myself, I think about those younger than me, my grandchildren. They're so tiny".

Under the theme of *earthquake and emotions*, seven categories were emerged: difficult moments, earthquake experience in old age, earthquake memories, age-related helplessness, to hope, emotionally challenging moments, and motivations (See Figure 1). The findings show not only that older individuals experienced intense

fear, loneliness, and helplessness after an earthquake, but also that these emotions form a mutually reinforcing structure. Difficulties accessing basic needs and the inability to reach loved ones stand out as key factors that increase emotional vulnerability beyond physical deprivation. However, a significant pattern observed in the participants' narratives is that negative emotions are not entirely dominant; rather, they are reinterpreted through religious beliefs, life experiences, and a sense of hope. This indicates that participants view the earthquake experience not only as a traumatic event but also as a test of patience, fate, and faith. In this context, the emotional healing process is not merely an individual process that can be explained solely by psychological resilience. The findings show that culturally internalized religious beliefs and life experiences that develop with aging play a significant role in individuals managing the negative emotions they experience after a disaster. Thus, there is a dynamic, rather than linear, relationship between emotions such as fear, helplessness, and loneliness, and hope, faith, and resilience.

One of the most striking findings of the study is that older individuals do not evaluate the earthquake solely in terms of physical losses. For participants, the disaster experience takes on meaning as a process in which intense emotional experiences, such as fear of death, loneliness, and uncertainty, are intertwined with religious beliefs, life experiences, and social support mechanisms. This shows that the post-disaster recovery process cannot be explained by approaches that focus only on meeting physical needs;

psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions are also fundamental components of recovery.

Yanardağ et al. (2025) conducted a study on loneliness and death anxiety in older adults after the Kahramanmaraş earthquake and found that older adults experienced high levels of death anxiety and were at risk. Consistent with Yanardağ et al. (2025) that older adults experience a high level of fear of death during and after the earthquake. The data obtained show that physical needs were not met during and after the earthquake. Similarly, in their study investigating the difficulties and coping strategies faced by older adults after the Kahramanmaraş earthquake, Alici and Kalanlar (2024) emphasized that older adults experienced economic and nutritional problems due to the damage and destruction in their homes, and stated that mobile sinks were used due to difficulties in accessing clean water. Another important point is that older individuals are more resilient in maintaining a sense of hope, coping with helplessness, and managing feelings of loneliness; this resilience appears to contribute to maintaining their motivation. Belief in God, which is the common code for all three categories, shows that older adults use religion as a coping strategy and that religious beliefs increase their psychological resilience. Despite difficulties such as 'not being able to reach their relatives' and 'losing acquaintances', the data show that they experienced the recovery process positively thanks to their positive perspective, beliefs, and maturity. Similarly, in a systematic review of the resilience of older adults who experienced

disasters, Timalsina and Songwathana (2020) emphasized that religious factors enhance resilience among older adults after disasters, reduce trauma levels, and are effective in coping with challenges.

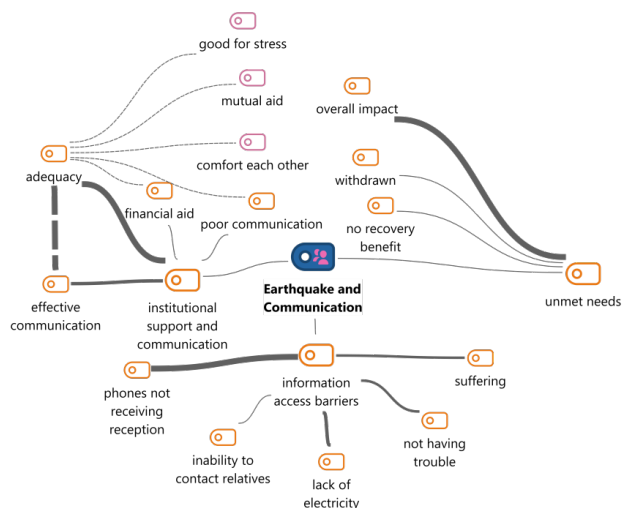


Figure 2: Earthquake and Communication

P8: “The phones weren't working. There was no electricity either. We couldn't get any news; we couldn't get any news from our relatives. It was very difficult. We also had difficulty getting information. We thought everyone had probably died”.

P12: “When the municipality and some institutions came, they tried to support everyone. They said, 'If there's anything you need, let us know, we'll bring it'”.

P20: “The aid organizations that came to the earthquake zone were very kind. The aid was also good. Two women came to clean. They cleaned my house. They also received my blessings”.

Under the theme of *earthquake and communication*, three categories were emerged: unmet needs, information access barriers, institutional support and communication (See Figure 2). The findings indicate that communication, in addition to being a means of accessing

information for older individuals, is a fundamental social mechanism that enables the reconstruction of trust after a disaster. In participants' narratives, disruptions to communication infrastructure are associated with technical problems, the inability to reach loved ones, uncertainty, and a deepening sense of loneliness. In contrast, face-to-face communication with neighbors, family members, and the immediate environment stands out as a solidarity mechanism that significantly compensates for the shortcomings in formal communication channels. This demonstrates that, during disasters, communication depends not only on technological infrastructure but also on the quality of social relationships. One key pattern revealed by the research is that older individuals' communication needs rely more on trust-based social relationships than on digital communication tools. For participants, access to reliable information was often possible through direct communication with family members, neighbors, or local institutions rather than digital platforms. This finding suggests that post-disaster communication policies based solely on technological solutions may be insufficient to meet the needs of older individuals. Therefore, post-disaster communication strategies should be planned holistically, strengthening both digital communication channels and face-to-face social support networks.

When the findings are evaluated together, it is seen that communication barriers, along with a lack of information, directly affect individuals' psychological well-being, sense of security, and sense of

social belonging. In other words, disruptions to the communication infrastructure after the earthquake created a secondary area of vulnerability that deepened the social and psychological effects of the physical disaster. Conversely, strong social relationships and local solidarity networks served as protective factors, reducing this vulnerability and supporting the recovery of elderly individuals.

The study by Temel and Altındağ (2025) shows that, after the earthquake, older adults used talking and sharing their emotions as a coping strategy to cope with distress. It also indicates that relationships within their close social circle contributed to reducing feelings of loneliness and facilitated recovery. Another notable category in the theme is the disruptions experienced in accessing information after the earthquake. It has been stated that older adults experience communication barriers, such as phone lines not working and difficulties contacting relatives due to disruptions to the communication infrastructure after the earthquake. Phraknoi et al. (2023), in their research on the needs of older adults, similarly emphasize that their information and communication needs during and after the disaster are not clearly met. Another important category in the model is the communication established by institutions and organizations with older adults during and after the earthquake. The data show that institutions and organizations have effective communication with older adults and interact with them. McClelland et al. (2017), in their study investigating the

psychological and physical effects of extreme events experienced by older adults, emphasized the importance of clearly and understandably defining the forms of information provided to older adults, especially after natural disasters such as earthquakes. The findings reveal some seemingly contradictory patterns within the communication context. Participants frequently cited disruptions to telephone lines, difficulties reaching loved ones, and difficulties accessing information, particularly immediately after the earthquake. However, as the institutional support process progressed, some participants rated their communication with AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency), health teams, and other public institutions as adequate. Therefore, communication experiences varied across different time periods and communication channels during the disaster. Similarly, codes such as "poor communication," "not enough," and "status unknown" in the MAXQDA analysis reflect the uncertainty and disruptions experienced in the communication process, especially in the initial stages of the disaster. Conversely, the findings regarding "adequate institutional communication" indicate that some participants were able to access institutional support services later. As a result, these codes should not be considered mutually exclusive but rather complementary findings reflecting different phases of the disaster process and the participants' different experiences.

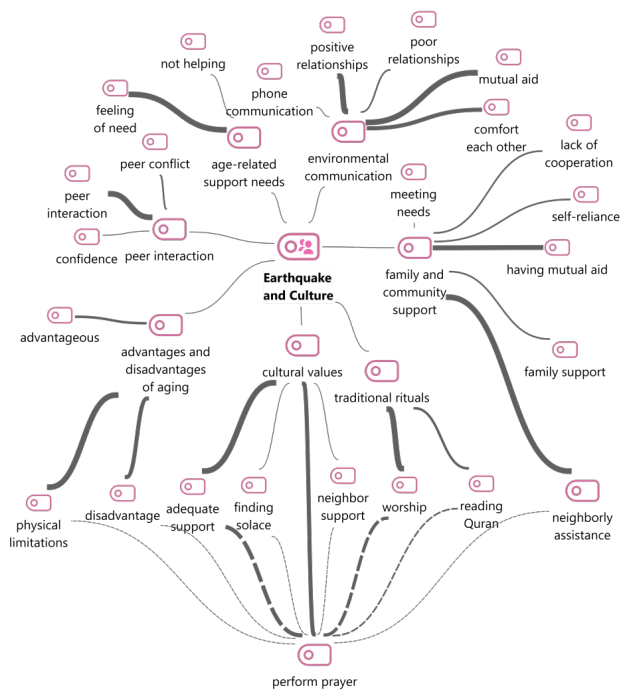


Figure 3: Earthquake and Culture

P8: "I pray, I read the Quran, so this stress helped. I don't know, if it weren't for my Quran, I would have gone crazy".

P11: "Everyone helped each other. Praying, seeking refuge in prayer, helping neighbors helped me a lot. I found comfort in these things, of course. It helped".

P20: "It was raining outside; the weather was cold. I was very scared; I was naked. Our neighbor immediately brought me his father's sweater and socks. May God bless him. May his mother and father rest in peace. We survived thanks to them".

Under the heading of *earthquake and culture*, seven categories were emerged: Cultural values, traditional rituals, family and community support, environmental communication, age-related support needs, peer interaction, advantages and disadvantages of aging (See Figure 3). When the findings are considered together, it becomes clear that the primary reason older individuals turn to cultural

values is not solely the desire to maintain traditional habits. In a disaster environment where uncertainty and a sense of loss of control are intensely experienced, religious beliefs, traditional rituals, and strong social relationships provide individuals with predictability, security, and a sense of belonging. Hence, culture serves as a protective mechanism that reduces psychological and social vulnerabilities following a disaster; it significantly enhances individuals' ability to cope with feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and uncertainty. One of the most important results of the research is that culture functions not only as a set of traditional values passed down from the past, but also as a dynamic social resource that shapes the recovery processes of older individuals after a disaster. In the participants' narratives, religious beliefs, family solidarity, neighborhood relations, and traditional mutual aid practices stand out as complementary elements. This situation shows that post-disaster interventions focused solely on physical recovery will not be sufficient; holistic policies that account for cultural context, social capital, and local solidarity mechanisms will be more effective in supporting the long-term well-being of older individuals.

The data show that older individuals tend to hold religious beliefs and that maintaining strong social relationships positively impacts post-disaster recovery. It has been observed that individuals practiced religious values and rituals, such as 'worshiping', 'praying', 'reading the Quran', and 'performing namaz', to reduce stress, find solace, and feel relief, in

accordance with traditional values and affiliations after the earthquake. These rituals appear to play a supportive role in the post-earthquake recovery of the older adults. Similarly, Pratama (2023), in her study investigating the role of religion in coping with trauma from natural disasters, emphasized that religious beliefs provide hope and emotional support to individuals in times of crisis, such as earthquakes. In their research on the role of religious beliefs and practices, Gianisa and Le De (2018) found that they increased after the earthquake and may play an important role in providing emotional and social support in the post-earthquake period. Another notable finding is that social relations are an important support mechanism after the earthquake. It has been observed that social networks, such as neighborly cooperation, family members supporting each other, helping each other, and consoling each other, form an important basis for older adults and contribute to their recovery after a disaster. Similarly, Phraknoi et al. (2023) emphasized in their study on the needs of older adults in disaster response that social capital plays a supportive role in their recovery and that relatives such as family, friends, and neighbors provide emotional support by meeting their needs such as gathering information and making plans, as well as contributing to their recovery. Another key point in the findings is that old age appears to be a disadvantage that increases vulnerability rather than a protective factor in this process. The data show that older adults are a more vulnerable group during periods of natural disasters such as earthquakes, along with

physical difficulties such as 'not being able to use physical strength'.

Research findings indicate that cultural values, communication styles, and social support networks are integral components of the recovery process for older individuals following a disaster, alongside physical conditions and psychological resilience. In this respect, the study supports previous research on the vulnerability of older individuals after disasters, while also highlighting the need to evaluate the recovery process within a cultural context. In particular, considering religious beliefs, family ties, and neighborhood relationships together expands the existing literature on the multifaceted nature of post-disaster recovery.

The findings corroborate the social support approach frequently emphasized in the literature on disaster communication and community solidarity, while also demonstrating that cultural elements are a key factor shaping the formation of this support in the experiences of older individuals. In other words, social support is not merely a process explainable by interpersonal helping relationships; it is also guided by cultural norms, religious practices, and local forms of solidarity. This suggests that current approaches to post-disaster recovery need to consider the cultural dimension more strongly.

One of the key contributions of this study to the literature is its holistic assessment of the disaster experience of older individuals, integrating communication, culture, and emotions. While many existing studies focus separately on the physical

needs, psychological effects, and social support mechanisms of older individuals after a disaster, this research reveals how these elements interact. Thus, it demonstrates that post-disaster recovery should be understood through a holistic framework comprising cultural belonging, communication networks, and social relationships, alongside individual resilience and institutional support.

The findings also reveal important implications for implementation. In particular, it is understood that post-disaster support programs should not focus solely on physical needs such as shelter, healthcare, and economic assistance; practices that strengthen older individuals' cultural values, communication habits, and social support networks should also be among the fundamental components of disaster management. Hence, it is considered that planning disaster policies for older individuals with a holistic approach that takes cultural context into account, supports local solidarity, and includes age-friendly communication strategies will significantly contribute to post-disaster recovery.

The fact that all female participants in the study were housewives and all male participants were retired necessitates an evaluation of the findings within a gender context. While the safety of family members, the restoration of domestic order, and care responsibilities became more visible in women's narratives, male participants emphasized protecting the family, material losses, and communication with the outside world. These differences indicate that the experience of a disaster is

shaped not only by age but also by the social roles individuals assume throughout their lives. However, since the aim of the study was not to compare the experiences of female and male participants, these differences should not be considered as definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, the findings suggest that gender roles may influence the responsibilities, coping strategies, and social support expectations of older individuals following a disaster. As a consequence, future studies that comparatively examine the disaster experiences of elderly women and men from a gender perspective could make significant contributions to the literature.

This research demonstrates that addressing the experiences of older individuals after a disaster solely from a vulnerability perspective is insufficient. The findings reveal that older individuals, thanks to their cultural knowledge, life experience, and strong social connections, can develop active resilience during the post-disaster recovery process. In this respect, the study offers an alternative perspective to the view of elderly individuals as a vulnerable group in need of protection, by highlighting their cultural and social capital. This approach makes a significant theoretical contribution to the literature on aging and disasters.

Conclusions

It is evident that culture, beliefs, and communication play an important role in the recovery phase of older adults following the February 6 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes. The research findings reveal the vulnerability of older adults, not only physically but also emotionally and

spiritually, after the earthquake. While emotional reactions such as fear of death, loneliness, and helplessness come to the fore, it has been observed that these feelings are given meaning by religious beliefs, cultural values, and social support and ties. During and after the earthquake, older adults experienced many communication limitations, especially problems such as lack of phone signal, difficulty accessing information, and not being able to reach their relatives, which increase their stress and anxiety levels. However, strong neighborly relationships, solidarity, and a strong social support network allowed them to continue communicating with their surroundings and to experience a more emotionally balanced recovery. Despite the physical vulnerabilities associated with old age, many participants reported relying on their life experiences, religious beliefs, and existing social support networks to cope with the post-disaster recovery process. The influence of cultural factors in the healing process has become evident, especially through religious beliefs and traditional values. Religious rituals such as praying, performing namaz, and reading the Quran appear to be a coping mechanism for older adults after a disaster and have a significant impact on their sense of hope. In this respect, it has been understood that cultural values function as a spiritual element that increases the post-traumatic resilience of older adults. In conclusion, the findings reveal that the post-earthquake recovery process of older individuals is shaped by beliefs, communication practices, social support, and physical recovery. Social support

networks, such as family, neighborhood ties, and religious communities, have helped older adults regain a sense of belonging after the disaster by reducing feelings of helplessness and loneliness. In this regard, attention to the cultural values, religious beliefs, social support, and communication resources of older adults in post-disaster interventions is critical for both psychological and social solidarity.

Recommendations

The study revealed that older individuals most strongly experienced fear, loneliness, helplessness, and uncertainty after an earthquake. However, religious beliefs and social support mechanisms were found to play a significant role in managing these emotions. Hence, in addition to meeting physical needs, psychosocial support models that address the psychological and spiritual needs of older individuals should be developed in post-disaster response programs. Creating support mechanisms that take local cultural values into account will significantly contribute to the recovery processes of older individuals after a disaster.

The findings indicate that one of the most significant problems for older individuals after a disaster is disruptions in communication infrastructure and difficulty accessing reliable information. In consequence, when preparing disaster communication plans, the communication habits of older individuals should be considered. In addition to digital communication tools, face-to-face information sessions, neighborhood-based communication teams, and alternative

communication channels should be an integral part of disaster management.

Research has shown that family ties, neighborhood relationships, and religious practices constitute significant social capital for older individuals in their post-disaster recovery processes. Accordingly, post-disaster recovery policies should focus not only on institutional services but also on practices that strengthen local solidarity networks. Volunteer support systems developed at the neighborhood level, programs that encourage family participation, and culturally sensitive social support practices can support the long-term well-being of older individuals.

Upon evaluating the research findings, it is evident that the post-disaster recovery process for older individuals should be addressed within a holistic framework that integrates physical, psychological, cultural, and communication dimensions. As a result, future disaster policies will not be sufficient to focus solely on emergency response; developing age-friendly and culturally sensitive practices that consider the social relationships, cultural values, and communication needs of older individuals will contribute to more sustainable recovery processes.

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