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# Aging and Learning in a Non-Western Culture: The Case of Malaysia

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**Abstract:** *A case study on older Malaysian men and women revealed that from their perspective, aging is seamless and a period of contentment. They are concerned about their health, spiritual, and community. They learn informally to meet the changing demands of their life. The learning is shaped by their cultural value.*

How individuals view their own and others' aging will be framed by the values of the cultural group to which they belong. Indeed, these values will likely determine the issues and concerns of older adulthood as well as the nature of the learning activities for this life stage. Giordano (1992, p. 23) observes that "culture and experience provide expectations that shape the process of aging by defining and evaluating an older person's status and role." How well an aging person adapts to changing life circumstances is a function of a "group's cultural heritage [which] represents the accumulation of its tried and tested methods for adapting to life." The purpose of this study was to understand the nature of aging and learning in a non-Western culture. The Southeast Asian country of Malaysia was deemed a particularly rich setting for this study as the culture itself is a blend of three Asian cultures – Malay, Indian and Chinese.

In the West, which values individual control, self-sufficiency, autonomy, activity and production, the "modern Western tradition harbors few inspiring narratives [about aging] apart from more technical control of aging processes" (Baars, 1997, p. 294). Media-based narratives are market-driven, reflecting a "battle against the decay of human nature in the form of wrinkles, loss of energy, and memory, while political narratives "are dominated by discussions about the costs of care required by the aging society" (p. 294). By and large, the plethora of studies of aging in the West focus on how to maintain independence, adapt to changing life circumstances, overcome health problems, compensate for cognitive decline, and so on. These values are reflected in the learning needs of older adults in the United States. Wolf (1998, p. 20) summarizes the

trends as:

Self-sufficiency, the ability to remain in control of one's life, is a prime motivation for adults of all ages...Learning for exercise and health maintenance is essential...Education for continued self sufficiency, for community living, for vocational, retirement, health, housing, and for other concerns is ongoing. Indeed, new ways of approaching aging, known as "successful aging" in medical gerontology and "productive aging" in political gerontology, are a part of understanding the changing role of the older adult. Education for autonomy for older cohorts will be essential.

Studies with Asian older adults suggest that while there are some commonalities in the issues, concerns and learning activities engaged in, there are also differences. Most older adults are concerned with health matters and to some extent the security of their living situation. However, family relationships and spiritual life appear much more prominently in studies with Eastern elderly; these concerns of course reflect Eastern cultural values of the collective over the individual, harmony and spirituality over material and personal well-being.

Malaysia covers an area of 329,723 square kilometers. About six percent of the 22 million populations are senior citizens. Malaysian culture is a mixture of primarily Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnic groups, each with its own set of values, rituals, symbols and heroes. However, values common to all Malaysian ethnic groups include a focus on collectivity and relationships, respect for elders,

loyalty, social hierarchy, religion, harmony, and saving face (Abdullah, 1996). Of particular interest to the researchers in this study was how these values framed how older adults themselves characterized both aging and learning in late life.

### Methods

A qualitative research design was employed to address the questions of the study. Qualitative research is descriptive and inductive, focusing on uncovering meaning from the perspective of participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam 1998). The sample consists of nineteen Malaysian adults from both rural and urban settings. The age range is from 60 to 83 years old. Of the 19 participants, 10 are Malays, 5 are Chinese Malaysians, and 4 are Indian Malaysians. There are 12 men and 7 women in the study. Level of education ranges from three participants with no formal education to one with a Ph.D. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Eleven interviews were conducted in English; six in Malay and translated simultaneously to English by the bilingual research team member; two interviews conducted in Tamil were translated by a bilingual assistant. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using the constant comparative method as presented by Glaser and Strauss (1967).

### Findings

Findings from the inquiry are presented in two themes. First, the characterization and concerns in aging. Second, learning in aging.

#### *Characterization and Concerns in Aging*

Malaysian older adults in this study characterized aging as a seamless process, as a period of contentment, as having freedom from responsibility, and as a time of respect. The participants see older adulthood as merely a continuation of their life as they have lived them, rather than a separate stage of life span to be segmented out with its own unique developmental tasks and issues. Older adults studied had trouble considering themselves old. According to Manan, a public administrator turned politician and later businessman "I never grow old. I feel young, but I don't act in a young way." At 74, everyday Manan keeps on planning things he needs and wants to do, both in short and long term. Manan passed away a few months after the interview.

The older adults seem to accept aging and its limitation. It is natural to be less healthy. Despite

not being able to walk due to arthritis, Karimah is thankful for what she has and learned to cope with her disability. The participants are contented with their present life. The contentment has largely to do with their freedom from parental responsibility of bringing up the children. Participants Varathan, Yin, Gopal, Karimah, and Shafei who have many children are relieved and contented now that their children are on their own and doing well. Having met most of their basic needs most respondents do not have much to worry about. They are less concerned about making money and accumulating wealth. Yin who took an optional retirement after working for 39 years first in the army and then as radio technician, shared his view about money:

*Anything you can do with money, but not everything . . . When I have enough, I don't want to struggle anymore. I've done my duty. I brought up all my children. Most of them are working, enough to survive on their own. I am quite contented. There is no point if I get to (become) a very rich man and I cannot die on my own bed (die as I please). What for?"*

The retired participants are free of work demands to do what they please. In-fact, the freedom to do as they please is one the best thing about this age. Explains Tom, "When we (he and his wife) are working, we have to do what we have to do. Now we can do what we want to do, what we like to do, what we enjoy doing (volunteering). It might not be other people cup of tea". Ali commented how he feels about life after retirement, "I can do things that I want and I am financially secure". He cherished the freedom to do things at his own and not having to be "pressured" by anybody.

The major issues of concern at this time in life were their health, their spiritual life, and their family and community. Good health is essential to continue with their daily chores and to take care of themselves. Irrespective of their religious belief, they feel closer to God. Being community oriented, their family, friends, community and country are important in their life. They gain satisfaction in seeing others well and happy.

#### *Learning in Aging.*

Learning is lifelong, nonformal, incidental and experiential "School" is not seen as a place for

learning for these older adults. Religious classes at the local mosque are the closest thing to a formal learning mentioned by the Muslim participants. Seventy-year-old Devi listens to radio where she learns songs and poetry. She is also learning English informally from her children and grandchildren. William, retired from the military, says that only the fellow “who is lying in the grave has completed his education. Until then you got to learn.”

What they are learning is embedded in their everyday lives. As a function of normal aging maintaining health, again in informal ways, has become a focus of learning for several. Yin walks two miles each day to stay fit and reads about health and nutrition. Daniel and Amy have become vegetarian and now are experimenting with a small “kitchen garden” in their backyard. For the Muslim Malays, religious instruction is also part of their everyday lives. From Rokiah with no formal education, to the most educated Ali, reading the Koran and/or attending religious instruction usually at the mosque are daily activities. Learning is also integrally related to their work life. All four farmers, Shakran, Safie, Ismail, and Jafar reported learning new farming techniques through a combination of experimentation and advice from local extension agents.

For most of the adults in the study, learning activities were seen as social activities. Aziza, who owns a batik shop, participated in association functions as much for the social interaction as learning different batik techniques. From her association – sponsored trips she incidentally learns about new tools and design. Attending study group is a socially important activity for those who are learning more about their religion. For some, especially the women, it may be their only social outlet outside family activities. For a number of men in the study, going to the mosque for prayers also give them opportunity to discuss religious, political, and community civic issues. Besides meeting their own needs, the participants also learn for the benefit of others and for improving the community. This responsibility was carried out through being good role models, through volunteering, and through engaging in social action agendas.

Whether Muslim, Christian, Hindu, or Buddhist, the participants in the study spoke of learning in philosophical and spiritual terms. Personal or material gain did not appear to motivate these older adults. To a person, they are content with their lives

as they are. Asked what guides their life and learning at their present age, most spoke about being open to new ideas, being tolerant of other races and religion, helping others, leading a good life, and preparing for the after life. William sees learning as integral to living. We should be “eager to learn” and that “even in a dark tome, there’s always light.” He quotes a proverb that says, “Zeal without knowledge is fire without light. I want to learn all things and ideas”. To the Muslim participants religious instruction is very important for their spiritual needs to guide them in their everyday life. It is more critical at this stage of their life as preparation for their after-life. At 66 Jaafar considers living “at an advanced age, (living) on a bonus.” Taking prophet Muhamad as an exemplar, to Jaafar and other Muslim men studied, living beyond 63 is living on borrowed time. They want to be prepared to meet their maker.

Many participants believe that they have to give back to others. Being experienced and respected by their family and community they are aware of their social role as mentors, advisors. The conviction that it is now their turn to contribute and provide leadership inspires them to continue learning. Safei read religious books to provide leadership at his community mosque. Gopal shares his reading and ideas with the young Indians in his community.

## Discussion

This study sought to understand how Malaysian older adults view aging and learning. It also explore what shape their learning in older adulthood takes. From interviews with 19 Malaysians who are above sixty years old, it was discovered that learning is non-formal and experiential. Their learning serves to help them deal with challenges and concerns in aging such as health, spiritual, family and community. These findings are discussed both in terms of what we know about older adults and learning and the Malaysian cultural values of collectivism, hierarchy, relationship and religion (Abdullah, 1996).

That older adult learning in Malaysia in nonformal and embedded in the context of everyday life is hardly surprising given what we know about adult learning in general. Throughout human history, learning had been firmly linked to living, indeed humans had to learn to survive. The association of learning with formal institution such as schools is a 20<sup>th</sup> century phenomenon. So firmly is the link between learning and schooling that adults have a dif-

difficult time identifying learning, which is a part of their everyday life. Being a young nation, only within the last couple of decades has education been a priority in the country. The current cohort of elderly Malaysian has had minimal formal schooling (Pala, 1998). In our study, three participants had no formal education and seven had less than grade six. During our interview, only through careful probing and attentive listening was their embedded learning surfaced.

While the majority of adult learning, including learning by older adults in all cultures is through nonformal and informal means (Merriam & Brockett, 1997), there are also some contextual factors helping explain its prevalence in Malaysia. Being a developing nation, the country's priority is on formally educating its youth. There is no specific educational policy for adults in the country.

The participants view aging as a non-discrete natural process. They learn to deal with the challenge and demand of aging like declining health and changing environment, function, and role. Girlie learned to move around the old-folk home where she stays with the help of walking stick due to arthritis. When they were children, both Girlie and her sister Mary were given up for adoption. Without family and unable to support themselves anymore, both single ladies try their best to be comfortable in their new environment. Being communal, 31% of the elderly in Malaysia live in nuclear family households while another 56% were part of extended families (Pala, 1998).

The compulsory retirement age in the Malaysian public sector and some private sector is 55. Even after compulsory retirement, Shakran, William, and Manan continue to work fulltime. All learn new skills to cope with new work function. Devi learns English to communicate and help her grandchildren with their schoolwork. Ismail and Safei seek religious education partly to enable them to advise younger people who seek them for advice. The Malay, Chinese, and Indian culture practices respect to the elderly. As someone "who has taken more salt" (experienced) and a respected community member, the senior citizen serves as role model and mentor and enjoys the privilege of being sought for advice, ideas and leadership.

The Malaysian elderly believe that it is their responsibility to contribute and give back to society. Triandis (1995) points out that "in collectivist culture, helping is a moral obligation, thus obliga-

tory, not voluntary (as it is in individualistic cultures)". Ali reported "I am what I am because somebody gave me a break – period". He appreciates that opportunity and likes to do his part in return, "I ask God to make use of me until I am completely used up". Manan would like to meet his maker in peace, having met his duty contributing to others. To elderly like him, serving others is both a moral and religious obligation. They learn to fulfill their duty. For example, Amy and Daniel learned Tai Chi so they could teach it to the elderly where they volunteer.

Elders studied talked of learning as a social activity where they enjoyed being in group and relating to other learners as much if not more that what they were actually learning. Socializing from birth "to maintain harmonious relationships in social setting of mutual interdependence as found in the village . . . family, friends, and the community take precedence over self-centered interest such as profit and materialism" (Abdullah, 1996, p.26). This orientation help explain why Aziza cares more for making her batik shop a place to socialize than for increasing her profits. Gopal gets satisfaction from sharing his ideas about improving the community with his clients while having their haircut.

Irrespective of their religious background, all participants talked about their spiritual value. According to Yin "Religion always teach people (to be) good. Indian (Hindu) religion, Islam, Buddhist, church (Christian), they always teach people to do good. The community does bad (things). Religious belief plays a positive role in their life. For example, to Ramli, religion helps to shape how he thinks, how he sees life, what he does. Islam, the country's official religion, looks at learning as duty calling "To seek knowledge is a sacred duty of every Muslim, male and female" (Abdullah, 1966, p.33). According to the Quran, learning is an obligation for every Muslim to meet individual needs (for example, how to pray and community needs (as in learning to prepare the dead for burial). God rewards learners for their learning effort. Muslims are expected to learn from cradle to grave. They are reminded that the first word from God to the 40-year-old illiterate prophet Muhamad was "Read! In the name of your lord, who has created all that exists" (Al Qu'ran, surah 96, verse1). Further, the companions of the prophet studied in spite of being old. Other major religions in Malaysia – Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian – also recognize the virtue of

learning and education. The close association between religion, community and learning in Malaysia is reflected in the role of the places of worship. The Muslim mosque, Christian church, and Hindu and Buddhist temples all double as places of learning as well as community centers.

In summary, aging is a non-discrete natural process for the Malaysian elderly. They learn informally to deal with the changes that take place as they age. They learn to meet their own needs and community needs. They appreciate the company and social support of their family and community. They are respected. They are spiritually driven. Their ability in learning to cope, and their culture and value system help them to grow old gracefully with contentment.

#### **In Retrospective**

The older Malaysian characterization of aging and learning was seen to reflect Malaysian culture and values. Malaysian value and strive to uphold their cultural heritage. They embraced modernization and the changes that came with it, while at the same time holding tight to their traditional lifestyle that reflects their worldview and contribute to their civilization. This study underscores the importance of considering the cultural context when investigating questions of adult development and learning.

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