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Between Modernization and Tradition: How does Culture Shape Older Taiwanese Women's Perceptions of Successful Aging?

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to understand how Taiwan's culture context shapes the definitions of successful aging of older women. By interviewing 14 older Taiwanese women who aged over 60 and regularly volunteered for at least two years, the findings supported that successful aging was culturally constructed.

Introductions

The fast aging of the world's population is a challenging fact in the 21st century. There are more healthy seniors than ever before. To age successfully is a need for everyone and successful aging has become "a guiding theme in gerontological research and a challenge for the design of social policy" (P. B. Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 4). Besides reducing risks of diseases and disability, successful aging also means better development and adaptation to old age. The explorations of successful aging have supplemented and enriched the significant understanding of late adulthood. To date, related studies mainly focus on definitions, exploring determinants, such as health, theory-building (Crowther et al., 2002; Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997). Just recently, few researchers tried to understand the definitions of successful aging from different age groups and cultures (Chou & Chi, 2002; Lamb & Myers, 1999; Torres, 1999, 2003).

Frequently-cited adult development theories have been dominantly focused on the stages before age 65. It has been only since the 1980s that researchers have started noticing and building women-specific development models. Among those models, older women have almost been invisible. Since the 1960s, successful aging has become an academic term. In 1987, Rowe and Kahn first proposed the differences between usual aging and successful aging. Currently, related studies mainly adopt or modify the two often-cited definitions of successful aging proposed respectively by Rowe and Kahn (1997) as "low probability of disease and disease-related disability, high cognitive and physical functional capacity, and active engagement with life" (p. 433) and by P. B. Baltes and M. M. Baltes (1990) as "minimisation of losses and maximisation of gains" (M. M. Baltes & Carstensen, 1996, p. 405) in old age.

While our world is increasingly diverse and aging is as fast growing a phenomenon in Asia as in the West, most aging related studies have been mainly based on Western viewpoints with Western populations. Because successful aging is a social and cultural construction (Torres, 1999, 2003), it is likely that different values and cultures might result in different concepts of successful aging. Thus, there is a need to hear from the East, especially Asia and the Pacific region, with the most rapidly aging population in the world and will become home to the largest proportion of older persons aged 65 and above in the next 30 years (United Nations, 2002), when we explore issues related to successful aging. Moreover, although women outlive men and are the majority of the elderly population, many studies have shown that women have less advantages for aging successfully than men have (Andrews et al., 2002; Chou & Chi, 2002).

Nevertheless, very few studies depicted women's successful aging, although a few research findings have shown that there are different predictors of successful aging between men and women (Morgan et al., 1991). To address the aforementioned gaps and needs, the purpose of this study was to explore what successful aging means for older Taiwanese women and cultural influences on their perceptions and definitions of successful aging. In this article, I focused on presenting and discussing of how Taiwanese culture shapes these women's perception of successful aging.

Methods

A basic qualitative research design with semi-structural interviews was employed. Participants were recruited by recommendations of friends and organizations. The criteria of possible participants were (1) age 60 and over and (2) volunteered regularly at organization(s) for at least two years. The final numbers of the participants were 14. Considering the heterogeneity of old populations, I attended to achieving the diversity within the participants with regard to age, education, religion, resident area, and so on. Among the respondents, the age ranged from 60 to 90. In terms of educational attainment, two had no formal education, one took classes in graduate school, and many had at least high school education. In terms of marital status and living arrangement, except for two widowed, one was divorced, and one was never married, all married interviewees lived with spouse or also with married children together. Most were Buddhists, two were Christians, and some were either Taoists or had no specific religious belief. The living area was nationwide at either urban or rural places. The interviews mainly were at the institutions where the participants volunteered for. Each interview was approximately 60-120 minutes in duration. Some follow-up interviews for clarification and supplementation were conducted by phone. The whole process of each interview was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was adopted for data analysis. Final findings were mailed to more than half of participants and gained their feedback by phone for member check.

Cultural Influences on Definitions of Successful Aging

For the older Taiwanese women, successful aging was a term that equalizes to "a good old age" and can be interchangeable with "an ideal life at old age." They regarded successful aging as (1) being healthy, (2) having no financial worries, (3) maintaining good relationship and connections, (4) continuing contributing to society through volunteering, and (5) having a good death, not longevity. The data vividly showed Taiwanese culture did shape how older women perceived what a good old age meant. Religions, traditional Eastern philosophies, and modernization, all shaped the perceptions of successful aging of these older women in four ways. They are: (1) a changing intergenerational dynamic, (2) believing in karma, cause-and-effect, and fatalism, (3) being satisfied with what one has, and (4) pursuing a good death. In this article, I focused on the cultural influences on the definitions of successful aging in detail.

A Changing Intergenerational Dynamic

Since Taiwan's economy and society have been transformed from mainly agriculture to technology and service industry, such a transformation has impacted Taiwanese's life styles and family interactions. The most apparent is modernization and industrialization which often forced adult children to leave their parents for better work

opportunities. Although Confucianism emphasizes group/family more than individuals, the need of leaving home for better jobs caused by modernization and industrialization seemed to also influence Eastern family relationship. The changing attitudes and expectations of these participants toward children and grandchildren was an example of such influences.

Traditionally, raising children, especially sons, guaranteed an old Taiwanese a good old age because sons would live with the old parents and provide care and finance. Also, essential index of a good old age is seeing children establish their career and family and the birth of grandchildren. To see children's establishment of their career and family meant parents have finished their obligations toward societies and the clan and also meant the old parents could start enjoying their own lives without worries and sacrifices for children any more. Once children establish their career and family, it would be the time for children to provide feedback to their old parents which was regarded as a behavior of filial piety. To be able to see the birth of grandchildren meant there will be offspring to carry on the last name and history of the clan and continuously worship ancestry which is also customarily regarded as a behavior of filial piety. However, looking at the data from the participants' sharing and viewpoints, it is clear that such traditional values have changed and even have broken in some ways.

In this study, such a changing intergenerational dynamic most apparently showed in three dimensions: being independent, the desire of living with children, and relationship with grandchildren. Regarding being independent, many participants pointed out the necessity and importance of being independent personally and financially for the elderly to have a good life in late adulthood. Many mentioned that they would like to keep independent and would not like to add burdens to their children whether they were healthy or not. As Ming, a widowed participant who aged 82, said, "Dependence, no matter in physical health and mobility or in financial ability, is suffering." As for independent financial ability, most of them did not rely on children's financial provision. They had their own income from either pensions or the monthly senior allowance delivered by the government. As Nan, the second oldest participant, said, "If I had no pension, I could not be so happy and optimistic....Not like some old people felt devalued in front of children because of financial dependence. If you ask for money from children, you would always feel like you need to do something for them or help them."

Regarding the desire of living together with children, half either strongly felt it unnecessary or even disliked such an arrangement. Some even considered living in a senior center or a nursing home later and did not consider children as the primary caregivers. The other half admitted such a desire of living with children and regarded it as an index of having a good old age. However, they also realized that social modernization had changed many things. They knew that there were different viewpoints and daily schedules between generations. Due to the concerns about their children's work career, these women felt it acceptable to not live with children. Regarding the relationship with grandchildren, half of the respondents mentioned that it was not necessary for them to see grandchildren establish their career and family. Among them, some even said that it was fine to have no grandchildren. Most of the remaining hoped to see it but could accept if not being able to see this happen. For most participants, the work of taking care of grandchildren seemed not as obligatory and welcome as to elder women in the past.

Importantly, although there were changes of intergenerational dynamics, some kept intact. Although these women did not feel it necessary to live together with children, maintaining good connections between generations was still their wish in their heart. Compared to living together, children's and grandchildren's visitations at times and sending greetings by phone were important as alternatives to let these Taiwanese women ensure the familial connections. In addition, many participants pointed out the significance of their children's decent career and life so that they did not need to worry about their safety and wellness. Filial piety is a core traditional value in Eastern societies and can be presented in many ways. In this study, having children's feedback and financial support and having offspring to last the clan seemed to no longer be an essential way of fulfilling filial piety. Instead, some respondents stressed that children's showing filial obedience in terms of their attitudes and spoken expressions was an unignorable component of successful aging. For example, children's being respectful and concerned about old parents, not talking back in defiance, and understanding what elder parents want and need were what these women regarded as important.

Believing in Karma, Cause-and-Effect, and Fatalism

Through interviews we could see Eastern philosophies and prevailing religions strongly shaped how these women defined successful aging. Buddhism, Taoism, Taoist philosophy, and Confucianism are the major traditional belief systems in Taiwan. In addition, "Tian" is regarded as a scared power that overlooks everyone's behaviors and decides people's fortune/fate/future which is held in awe by most Taiwanese. The aforementioned intertwines and further forms a strong belief and value system and ideology in Taiwan. Such a system and ideology have been delivered through family, school, and society year by year and become a significant guide to people's attitudes, behaviors, and thoughts.

Buddhism regards life as a result of karma or cause-and-effect. In general, no matter what religions people believe, Taiwanese agree that "Shan You Shan Bao, E You E Bao" which means that either good or wicked, you will get something back based on whatever you give to others. A lot of old sayings describe how virtues can be accumulated and then keep individuals and families far away from calamities which can be regarded as the best example about the ingrained belief of cause-and-effect in Taiwan. Many Taiwanese believe that there is "somebody", either Tian, or Buddha, or God(s), watching you all the time and the justice will come sooner or later because of cause-and-effect.

For these women, continuing contributing to society through volunteering is one of the definitions of successful aging. Many agreed that they regarded their volunteer work as a charity. Although all of them regularly volunteered because of the enjoyment and meaningfulness of helping others, some mentioned such an altruistic activity is also a way to make them feel peaceful and blessed which was driven by their belief of karma. As some mentioned, whenever they did good deeds and benevolent actions, they believed that they would be protected by the Tian/Buddha/God(s). They believed that such benevolent actions could be transferred and accumulated as Yin-De, a kind of merits and virtue, which can benefit people's good death, next life, and descendants. We may also explain such a belief as a bank savings account which accrues interests. Many Taiwanese believe that virtue can be accumulated to promise their better future. Two participants' sons survived after encountering severe car accidents. Either the participants or their

neighbors believed that the only reason for their son's survivals was these women's practicing charities. Feng, a participant who won a national volunteer award, depicted the connections between the belief on cause-and-effect and a good old age:

If you do good deeds, you will be healthy and happy and your life will be more meaningful. Your last moment of life might not suffer too much and too long. If you do work of charity, someday when you are ill, someone might give you a hand and help take care of you....I just believe I will get something back someday because of my good deeds and volunteer work. Even if there will be no positive feedback in the future, I feel peaceful now for my future because I am helping people.

Being Satisfied with What One Has

The attitude of being satisfied with what one has is another dimension related to perceptions of successful aging shaped by Taiwanese traditional culture. Both "Wu Yu Ze Gang," an old saying based on Confucianism which means "people will be strong if they have no desire and request" and the emphasis of Buddhism on "few desires can clear the human mind" support the notion that less desire is better. From textbooks to words people said everyday, for Taiwanese, being content with whatever you have has been tightly connected with less worries and being happy. During interviews, being satisfied with what one has was mentioned either directly or indirectly as a key to a good old age.

As many participants said, the feeling of having a good life or bad life is subjective. They believed that once a person is satisfied with whatever he/she has had, then happiness and health can be possible. In addition, it seems that anything could be a reason that made these women felt satisfied. No matter one's financial condition, longevity or not, life quality, children's cares, and so on, "it has been good enough" was often mentioned by these older women. They did not pursue more money and enjoyment of ease and comfort. Ming stated: "The more you want and fuss about, the more troubles and worries you would get" were repeatedly heard during the interviews. Even Ming and Ting who depended on the \$3,000 NT dollars (less than 100 US dollars) monthly senior allowance from the government felt satisfied. Many of them experienced wars and said that they felt life was good enough because there still was rice in the household rice bucket. As Chen said, "I feel my life is good enough because I have food to eat, a place to live, and clothing to keep warm." For these Taiwanese women, being healthy and happy, having a smooth-going life, and being able to keep the current life had been good enough and they would never ask for more.

Pursuing a Good Death

The desire for a good death was another dimension related to perceptions of successful aging shaped by Taiwanese traditional culture. In contrast to Westerners' strong and active intentions of making efforts to have longevity, these Taiwanese women presented a different desire about life and death. Almost all participants pointed out that longevity was not important for them. For these women, a good death meant dying at home or dying without long term suffering and was strongly emphasized as an essential component of successful aging. In addition, such a desire was the same no matter what their religions were.

Taiwanese's attitudes toward death and longevity might be shaped by Buddhism, Taoism, and fatalism. Buddhism regards life as a bitter sea which might be used to

explain why these Taiwanese women did not pursue longevity. Taoism regards life as a natural phenomenon, being like a raindrop or a tree and cannot exist forever. “Wu Wei” is a key concept of this philosophy which means never dealing with anything intentionally. Thus, Taoism does not encourage people to pursue longer life on purpose. Fatalism might be another reason to understand the participants’ attitudes toward life-and-death. “Chen Shi Zai Tian” is an old phrase which means that the result of everything, including a person’s life/death and fortune/poverty, is decided by “Tian.” Also, Confucianism has taught Taiwanese (or many Asians) that fate will decide everything so the only important thing is to focus on enhancing personal morality and increasing the public’s well being when people are alive. The attitude toward following and accepting one’s fate often exists in Taiwanese behaviors and has been widely used to explain what happened and will happen in their lives. All the aforementioned might explain why the participants in this study showed an easy attitude toward longevity. Many said that they could not decide how many years they will have. Further, it is logically acceptable that if a person regards how long she/he can live as a thing she/he cannot pursue or control at all, she/he would pay more attention to pursue a good death. In this case, again, the belief in cause-and-effect and karma facilitate these women’s motivation to do more good deeds or charities to accumulate virtue and then have a good death.

Conclusion

This study shows and supports that successful aging is a cultural structure. Traditional beliefs and value systems and societal transformation due to modernization shaped the participants’ perceptions of what a good old age meant. In this study, (1) a changing intergenerational dynamic, (2) believing in karma, cause-and-effect, and fatalism, (3) being satisfied with what one has, and (4) pursuing a good death were four cultural phenomena found in terms of perceptions of a good old age. The voices of the Taiwanese older women reinforce and widen our understanding about what successful aging means based on perspectives of women and the Eastern culture. The findings also suggest that further studies and theories building about successful aging need to consider cultural influences.

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