

Original Paper

A Study on Successful Aging of Middle-and  
Advanced-Aged People  
— with Major Focus on the Current Status of Women in their  
Mature Stage Living in Three Districts in Japan —

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Abstract

With a view to clarifying the current status of successful aging in the case of women in their mature stage and recognizing the reality of successful aging, the author has recently conducted a questionnaire survey of 99 women aged from 30 to 59 living in three districts in Japan. In this survey, the respondents were asked to answer the questions concerning their current condition of successful aging by writing their answers and comments in a free form.

By analyzing the collected data using a qualitative factors based searching method, the following six categories have been extracted from their written answers and comments as major themes indicating the current status for those women: '*Participation*', '*Health*', '*Fulfillment*', '*Preparation*', '*Reconsideration*', '*Creation*'.

Furthermore, the following two points have been identified as the characteristics of successful aging in the case of women in their mature stage:

1. Fulfillment with their public and private activities as well as full satisfaction with their daily life, both of which are realized through efficient time management.
2. Creative preparation for their future life on the basis of their present living conditions.

Introduction

“Successful Aging” means how to live a healthy, happy and positive life. Now that our country has a population with a very high life expectancy, problems of senior citizens' lives are considered to be determined largely by the portion of their life experienced during their middle and elderly lifetime [1]. Successful Aging has become a very important theme not only for senior citizens but also for all other adults. For this reason, more and more studies and research with regard to preparatory behaviors and attitudes specifically of middle- and advanced-aged people toward Successful Aging are recently underway among scholars and students in related medical fields [2-4].

However, no study using a qualitative factors based searching method to clarify the current status of

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Successful Aging in the case of mature-aged people living halfway through their lifespan, and therefore, no exact identification of realities on this theme has been made yet. In addition, the mainstream studies on Successful Aging are being led only by American scholars such as E. Palmore[5] and J.W. Rowe [6-7], while in Japan, some students such as Sagaza [8], and Matsumoto and Watanabe [9] are tackling this subject, but have not yet made the realities clear. In preparation for the very near future, when our country comes to be a 'super-elderly society' where average lifespan is expected to extend to 80 years, the author is of the opinion that Japan's own "Successful Aging" must be designed for people in their young adult period to advanced-aged period and must take into consideration individual social and cultural background in order to help them lead a healthy, positive and happy life.

So, this study is intended to clarify the current status of successful aging and identify its realities using a qualitative factors based searching method which focuses on middle and advanced aged women, who are considered to have the most serious concerns over their anticipated old age[10].

### Purpose

The purpose of this study was to clarify the current status of successful aging in the case of women in their mature life stage and to identify the related reality of successful aging.

### Method

#### 1. Study Design

This study was designed and developed according to a qualitative and inductive research method and using descriptive content written by the respondents as source data for analysis. Analysis of their answers written on the free form questionnaire was conducted by applying B. Berelson's content analysis methodology [11-12] for reference.

#### 2. Data Collection

The questionnaire form in which respondents were able to write their answers and comments freely with regard to their present status of successful aging, was designed and developed by referring to the reports by K. Matsumoto and others[9], and the form was distributed to 350 people living in Districts A, B, and C with help of local resident volunteers, and then collected from the respondents by mail. The data collection duration was from November 4, 2004 through February 28, 2005. The questionnaire entries included such questions as what respondents have in their mind in daily life, what they care about most, what they find delight or consolation in for their life, what their spiritual support is or what they would appreciate in the current age.

Of all the respondents, a group of 99 women at their mature stage of life (namely, women at their ages ranging from 30 to 59) were isolated for further study. Their answers to the questionnaire were used as the source data for analysis.

#### 3. Data Analysis

A sentence or a paragraph which is similar to a sentence as far as its meaning is concerned, was regarded as a single data item to be used for analysis. Then, all the data items were sorted and coded three

times based on the similarity/difference of their expression and meaning. Next, the coded data items were subcategorized and then categorized by combining the subcategorized items based on the properties of the contents. The above entire process was repeated till the opinions of all the members of the study team came to an agreement. Also, in the process of categorization, the author periodically received review and supervision by certain specialists in the field of nursing and qualitative research, and the result of the data analysis was presented to them for evaluation so as to ensure the trust worthiness of the study through peer debriefing among those specialists.

#### 4. Ethical Considerations

The author made her utmost efforts to give ethical consideration to the respondents by convincing them in writing of the following:

- The objectives of the study.
- Her promise to keep anonymity of the respondents.
- Her promise to control the collected data strictly.
- Her promise to strictly observe each respondent's privacy.
- Her request for respondents' participation at their own discretion.

Thus, only those participants that agreed to the survey were requested to submit their answers.

#### 5. Definition of Terminology

'Successful Aging' means the process in which a human being adjusts himself/herself so as to adapt well to changes caused by aging and to live a happy and positive life worth living.

#### Results

An appropriate number of the questionnaire form copies were distributed to 350 people, out of whom 211 respondents sent back their answers (collection rate of 60.3%). Of all the 211 respondents, 99 women were at the mature stage of life (namely, their ages ranged from 30 to 59) and were chosen as the study group. The average age of these women was 48.2 (Table 1).

Total number of data items extracted from the contents written by the respondents on the survey form amounted to 1271, which were sorted into Code 1 (consisting of 246 items), Code 2 (consisting of 80 items), and Code 3 (consisting of 26). Furthermore, those coded items were classified into 15 sub-categories, from which the following six categories were extracted as the categories indicating the current conditions of successful aging in the case of women in their mature stage of life: '**Participation**', '**Health**', '**Fulfillment**', '**Preparation**', '**Reconsideration**' and '**Creation**' (Table 2).

The average number of data items collected per person targeted at by this study theme was 12.8. Hereinafter, a word in bold italics indicates a category name, a phrase in italics indicates a sub-category name, and a description in double quotes " " indicates a statement/description by an appropriate respondent.

Some examples of respondents' statements in '**Participation**' include "I want to contribute to society as a volunteer using my job skills which I've acquired over a long period of time," which is subcategorized in '*Desire for participation in society*' and "While trying to make my family life more comfortable, I wish to spend my remaining time communicating with people other than my family and make a contribution to society as much as possible," which is subcategorized in '*Communication with other people*'. "Relationship

Table 1 Breakdown of Respondents

99 women in their mature stage of life at ages of 30 through 59 living in Districts A, B and C.

Item	Classification	# persons(%)
Age Bracket	30–39 years old	11(11.1)
	40–49 years old	47(47.5)
	50–59 years old	41(41.4)
Average age: 48.2 years old		
With/Without Occupation/Form of Employment		
	Full-time	67(67.7)
	Part-time	18(18.2)
	Housewife	11(11.1)
	Blank	3(3.0)

with my husband has been deepened as a result of our child's independence." expresses '*Realization of human bonding and real feeling of existence*' between wife and husband. Comments such as, "It is my desire and responsibility for the moment to bring up my children to be good adults", "I wish to give birth to a baby and bring it up for the first time since I have no experience." and "It is interesting to see young people in my company growing up." are focused on the sub-category '*Bringing-up/development of next generation adults*', which is considered to be a characteristic unique to women in the mature stage.

As for '*Health*', '*Appreciation of good health*' is expressed by the comment: "Thanks to my good health, I am so busy working, taking care of my children, participating in a women's society and enjoying my hobby (reciting Chinese poems), etc." '*Efforts to keep oneself healthy*' with major emphasis on health maintenance and prevention against diseases in daily life are characterized by the comments: "I am careful in keeping a balanced eating habit, though it is very difficult to do so." "Having a sufficient rest and sleep in order not to get physically injured or suffer from diseases.", "No worrying over trifle things.", and "When something is wrong with my physical condition, I promptly go to hospital for quick curing and recovery".

With regard to '*Fulfillment*', satisfaction with production activity mainly related to one's work is expressed by the comments: "I am enjoying doing my regular business work assigned to me." and "I feel happy with my favorite job." Satisfaction with leisure time spent enjoying hobbies is implied by the comments: "Very glad that I am allowed to do whatever I want to whenever free." and "I'm enjoying growing vegetables in my home garden." All the above comments refer to '*Fulfillment with activities*' both public and private. On the other hand, a sense of the tension between work and leisure can be seen in the

Table 2 Current Status of Successful Aging in the Case of Women in their Mature Stage of Life

Category	Sub-categories
Participation	Desire for participation in society
	Communication with Other People
	Realization of human bonding and real feeling of existence
	Bringing-up/development of next generation adults
Health	Efforts to keep oneself healthy
	Appreciation of good health
Fulfillment	Fulfillment with activities
	Effective Time Management
	Awareness of happiness with one's everyday life
Preparation	Preparation for Aging
	Self-awareness of and Readiness for Death
	Preparation for future life
Recosideration	Self-reliance
	Retrospection of the first half of one's life
Creation	Challenge and exploration

following statements : “Although I am too busy every day to have leisure time, I always wonder how to use limited free time efficiently”, and another comment expresses: “I am careful to manage time in my daily life,” and trying to “make my job fit in with my hobby through Effective time management”. Therefore, despite a very busy daily life, “I feel happiest with the present conditions in which I am able to lead a humdrum life without any serious problem”, which forms part of the sub-category ‘Awareness of happiness

with one's everyday life'.

As for '*Preparation*', the respondents' mental attitudes of '*Preparation for aging*' are noticed in their concern about the amount of retirement pension they will receive in the future, and in comments such as: "I am anxious about how I can enrich my life when aged, and want to develop and polish my hobby and to strengthen myself mentally". Another mental attitude of '*Preparation for future life*' is observed in a respondent's contemplation of how to live her retirement life: "Although I have come to find what will interest me most in the rest of my life, I'm still searching for how I will be able to get along better with my family, especially with my husband," which implies her efforts to establish better relationship with other people. While they have hope for life as identifiable in comments such as "I don't want to die before my kids grow up," they are aware that death will surely come some day and as being unavoidable and '*Self-awareness of and Readiness for Death*' was expressed in comments such as "there are many different deaths but whenever I meet it I don't want to get upset or panic, so I want to live life to the fullest."

When it comes to '*Reconsideration*', a mental attitude of '*Self-reliance*' is observed in the comment: "Recently I have come to feel less worried over most things, and am more convinced of myself and now able to live a life of my own positively over the rest of my life span." Also, whereas positive '*Retrospection of the first half of one's life*' is expressed by the comments: "I have come to understand realities of things for the first time in my life only at age of 50." and "I have had very attractive and impressive experiences through a lot of meetings with people." ;sad and unhappy feelings such as those for the death of her spouse as well as for the aging of the respondent herself are expressed by the comments: "My husband died of cancer four years ago, and I have very few pleasant things now." and "I have lived quite a mundane life. Aging makes me feel so unhappy," which reveals her dissatisfaction with life to date.

In '*Creation*', mental attitudes of '*Challenge and exploration*', desiring to develop oneself, entertaining dreams for the future, and exploring new life on the basis of the present life is expressed by comments such as: "I intend to challenge everything positively for further self-development, even when I get older.", "I desire to mentally grow up further, and think of myself again on the basis of my present life." and "I'm determined to study more about my job, so that I can be an expert in this field."

## Discussions

### 1. Current Status of Women at Mature Stage for Successful Aging

From the descriptions in the categories, it is observed that women at their mature stage gain their happiness from uneventful days, finding something to live for through productive activities of their jobs and leisure activities or their hobbies. And their present status reveals that they are living a fulfilled-life by efficient time management of tight time constraint in their busy everyday life, which requires them to play a variety of roles in both public and private matters. Thus, from the viewpoint of self-development throughout the human lifespan [13], the productive-age population is composed of people at the mature stage of life. In workplaces, they play productive roles for their society and perform activities for fulfilling these roles. At home, they are at a stage where they are required to establish a new household [14] to play their roles as the wife and mother through marriage and childbirth. It is one of the major characteristics of women at their mature stage who are aging successfully that, as a human beings, they play multiple roles and enrich their lives through efficient time management.

For '*Health*', on the other hand, '*Efforts to keep oneself healthy*' are observed as well as '*Appreciation of good health*'. Most of these efforts are directed at disease prevention, aiming both at health maintenance in everyday life for meals, sleep and rest, exercise, etc. and at mental health care. At their mature

stage, during which they encounter a transitional period of life [15], women tend to feel that their future perspective is narrowing down because of limited time remaining in their life. Thus, it can be said that the mental operation represented by ‘*Self-reliance*’ and ‘*Retrospection of the first half of one’s life*’ in ‘*Reconsideration*’ leads to ‘*Preparation*’ for their remaining life, in which they will face aging and death. For this reason, attention should be paid to their attitudes toward the future, i.e. aging. Their attitudes are constructive and challenging in their quest for future dreams and goals based on their status quo. These attitudes are quite different from and have nothing to do with correction or abandonment of dreams, or correction of life in at the middle-aged stage of life [14], which used to have been observed traditionally. Creative preparations for the rest of life based on the present life status are also regarded as one of the major characteristics of women at their mature stage for successful aging.

In addition, the descriptions in ‘*Preparation*’ that particularly attract our attention are those in ‘*Preparation for future life*’, which is a subcategory extracted from the analytical processes. This preparation means efforts to find a way to get along well with others who are on close terms with them (such as their family and spouse) and other important people, while making mental preparations for aging and other preparations for the way they live life. Thus, they are trying to find the way in which they can go through their own processes for aging, maintaining good relationships with others. This further deepens the observations of the creative preparations for the rest of life based on the present life status, which is one of the major characteristics of women at their mature stage, as mentioned earlier.

For rebuilding matrimonial relationships with their husband, Okamoto reported difficulties in maintaining good matrimonial relationships and adjusting psychodynamics in old-aged couples after husbands approached their mandatory retirement age [16]. However, the rebuilding of matrimonial relationships in the mature stage of life, which tries to find the way to get along well with their husband while preparing for future life, presents a new perspective for refining matrimonial relationships toward successful aging (successful aging requires women to live a satisfactory life on their own initiative, having something to live for). Rebuilding of matrimonial relationships should be emphasized as one of the major characteristics of women at their mature stage for successful aging.

## 2. Suggestions toward Attainment of Successful Aging Starting from Middle-aged Period of Life (Applicable to Japanese People)

This section compares the categories extracted from this study with those in the preceding domestic literature [17] from the viewpoint of successful aging in Japan. When the categories are compared with the four conditions of successful aging suggested by [8], ‘*Participation*’ and ‘*Fulfillment*’ correspond to activities, ‘*Health*’ corresponds to health and longevity, and ‘*Preparation*’, ‘*Reconsideration*’, and ‘*Creation*’ correspond to satisfactions. The descriptions in the three categories ‘*Preparation*’, ‘*Reconsideration*’, and ‘*Creation*’ reveal positive future orientation toward old age. When this is compared with the behaviors of aged people for successful aging suggested by Matsumoto and Watanabe [9], it can be said that this positive future orientation links with the concepts of self-conservation and challenge. When the behaviors for successful aging started in the middle of life are observed based on these comparisons, Japanese midlife women’s status quo for successful aging reflects the preparatory status for old age. Thus, it is suggested that the status quo of women’s successful aging at their mature stage will develop into their life status in successful aging at old age.

### 3. Limitations of this Study and Future Problems

The results from this study have produced several suggestions helping understand the status quo of women in their mature stage for successful aging. When successful aging is considered as a process for getting old, the results considerably reflected positive attitudes toward successful aging. However, negative attitudes were revealed only in the descriptions of '*Retrospection of the first half of one's life*' of '**Reconsideration**' and could not be fully extracted. The realities, therefore, are not yet clarified. Another remaining problem is the behavior and attitudes of people who did not cooperate in this study. Their behavior and attitudes should be clarified, when successful aging is considered as a process to live a satisfactory life by successfully adjusting oneself to changes in aging and real-life situations, keeping something to live for in mind.

In addition, it is difficult to generalize the results of this study to their full extent, because the respondents were residents only in three districts in Japan. In order to deepen consideration by viewing Japan's successful aging from social and cultural backgrounds, another future problem should be solved - - a full understanding of the present status of people by accumulating more data from extended areas for data collection and by making full use of triangulation methodology.

Furthermore, it is important to investigate the behaviors and attitudes of Japanese men in the mature stage for successful aging and compare the results with those of women. Such investigations are necessary to clearly present these two points of the major characteristics of women at their mature stage for successful aging:

- Fulfillment with their public and private activities as well as full satisfaction with their daily life, both of which are realized through their efficient time management
- Creative preparation for their future life.

### Conclusion

1. Six categories were extracted by the qualitative factors based searching method used for analyzing the current status of women at their mature stage for successful aging: '**Participation**', '**Health**', '**Satisfaction**', '**Preparation**', '**Reconsideration**', and '**Creation**'.
2. Two points were found as the major characteristics of women at their mature stage for successful aging: 1) Fulfillment with their public and private activities as well as full satisfaction with their daily life, both of which are realized through their efficient time management, 2) Creative preparation for their future life on the basis of their present living conditions. From the descriptions of creative preparation for future life, a new viewpoint was particularly suggested for successful aging i.e. rebuilding of the matrimonial relationships at mature stage in life, which tries to find a way to get along well with their spouse.
3. From the observations of successful aging starting in the mature stage in life, it is suggested that the present life status is reflected on the preparations for successful aging at old age.
4. The results suggest that two problems remain unsolved. One is to clarify realities in the attitudes of people who showed negative attitudes toward successful aging. This is necessary to deepen consideration for Japan's successful aging in the mature stage in life. The other is to investigate the behaviors and attitudes of men in the mature stage for successful aging. This is necessary to clearly present the major characteristics of women in their mature stage.

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