

EXPLORATION OF THE AGING PHENOMENON IN HONG KONG FROM A LEISURE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract.—This study explores perceptions of a sample of Hong Kong's elderly on aging and life satisfaction, and suggests implications for leisure service delivery. Interviews were conducted with 25 elderly in Tsuen Wan District in Hong Kong. The study found that some of the propositions which have been developed in western countries to explain aging appear to be appropriate for explaining perception of "oldness" among the elderly in Hong Kong. Five perspectives appear to be applicable: chronological, biological, behavioral, sociocultural, and personal. The data suggested that aging was perceived to be explained by a combination of them. Depression was found to be a particularly influential factor leading to life dissatisfaction among interview respondents. The causes of depression reported by respondents were limited financial ability; feeling of loneliness; lack of leisure skills; dependency on others for care and financial income; and lack of companionship.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The world's population aged 65 and older is growing by approximately 800,000 people a month (U.S. Department of Commerce News 2001). In 2000, those aged 65 and older in the United States constituted 35 million (12%) of the total population (U.S. Census Bureau 2001). The aged population is projected to continue to grow, with particularly high growth occurring after 2010, when the baby-boom population reaches the age of 65 (Baloglu & Shoemaker 2001). A rising population of elderly people will result in a corresponding increase in demand for services for the elderly (Kwan 1990). Neglecting the needs of the elderly can lead to problems such as depression, alcohol abuse, smoking, and deterioration in health. Indeed, depression

and decline in health are the two main causes of suicides in later life (Teague & MacNeil 1992). In the context of Hong Kong, Liu et al. (1993) reported that depression is a serious problem; approximately 11 percent of elderly males and 15 percent of elderly females report they are depressed. Social support has been recommended as a cure to help Hong Kong elderly recover from depression (Chi & Chou 2001).

Over the past 40 years, several studies in western countries have reported on the relationship between leisure and aging (e.g., McGuire et al. 2004, Teague & MacNeil 1992). These studies provide evidence that recreation plays a role in maintaining the life satisfaction of the elderly. They indicate that people who are engaged more in recreation activities or settings tend to be more satisfied with their lives. However, few eastern studies have investigated the relationship between recreation and successful aging. In Hong Kong, for example, most aging research focuses on reporting daily activities and the health status of the elderly. Research seldom explains how aging is defined, what aging means to old people, and how it affects this age group's leisure behavior or vice versa. To help the elderly achieve life satisfaction, leisure managers in Hong Kong need to be equipped with better knowledge of the aging phenomenon of their population. This study explores perceptions of the elderly on aging and life satisfaction, and suggests implications for leisure service delivery based on the reports from a sample of Hong Kong elderly.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Aging

There is no universal definition of aging. According to Teague and MacNeil (1992), the meaning of "old" can be defined from six different perspectives: chronological, legal, biological, behavioral, sociocultural, and personal. A researcher's selection of a particular definition of being old depends on the focus and goal of the study.

2.11 Chronological Model

The chronological model, which uses calendar years as a measure of age, is the most frequently used perspective

(Teague & MacNeil 1992). Levinson et al. (1978) identify four stages of the life cycle: childhood and adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, and late adulthood. Each stage occurs at a specified chronological age. A transition period is identified between each of the stages. According to this model, the late adult transition begins at age 60 and five years are allocated for the transition. Thus, late adulthood begins at age 65. Iso-Ahola (1980) suggested that leisure behavior should be analyzed as a sequential function of developmental phases and transitional periods. However, the heterogeneity emanating from various biological backgrounds, means that caution should be exercised when applying these stages to different populations to avoid overgeneralization of their applicability to all social groups and cultures (Iso-Ahola 1980). Nevertheless, a majority of people are likely to pass through the sequential life stages indicated in the model (Gould 1975).

2.12 Legal Model

Teague and MacNeil (1992) pointed out that the law often assigns legislative responsibilities or benefits to specified chronological ages. The law defines legal age as “the age at which a person becomes old enough to make contracts. This is generally eighteen to twenty-one in most states, but it may be lower for specific purposes. The phase is sometimes used to mean the age at which a person can legally buy alcoholic beverages or legally consent to sexual intercourse” (Oran 1983, p. 242). For instance, in the United States, a minimum age of 21 is required in order to drink alcohol legally and a minimum age of 16 is required to drive legally. Age 65 is often used to define old age by the rules and regulations associated with Social Security payments, Medicare, assisted housing, and so on. For instance, Medicare, which is a health insurance component of Social Security used to cover hospital care and other medical care, is available only to those aged 65 or older and to certain disabled persons. People who fit in this age category are generally defined as old people.

2.13 Biological Model

Many have investigated biological changes in older adults attributable to the aging process (Teaff 1985, McGuire et al. 2004). The elderly often encounter changes in physiological characteristics such as changes in hair

coloration, skin, and appearance which can be observed, such as white hair, wrinkled skin, and poor eyesight, and these are often used in interpreting the oldness of a person (Teague & MacNeil 1992). Other symptoms cannot be observed directly without technological assistance, such as changes in the brain, nervous system, circulatory system, and other internal systems.

2.14 Behavioral Model

Behavioral traits displayed by older people, such as forgetfulness and slower motor time, may be used to define a person as old (Kalish 1982). Often stereotypes are used to interpret the behavior of the elderly. McGuire et al. (2004) have summarized both negative and positive stereotypes about aging and indicated that there is a tendency for negative stereotypes to prevail. Often perceptions towards the elderly are determined in face-to-face interaction (Hazan 2000) based on predetermined stereotypes associated with older people.

2.15 Sociocultural Model

Teague and MacNeil (1992) indicated that many changes associated with aging are socially and culturally determined. Different roles have been assigned to different stages of life. People's roles change as they age. For instance, play and study are often the behavior associated with childhood. When people grow up, they are expected to obtain a job, get married, and have children. Old people often are expected to be grandparents, be retired, and eventually become widows or widowers.

2.16 Personal Model

The personal model suggests that age is defined by the person being evaluated (Teague & MacNeil 1992). Some may perceive themselves as still being young compared to others in their age group due to their active lifestyle. However, some may perceive themselves as being relatively old because of the miserable life conditions or difficult financial situation that they are facing (Teague & MacNeil 1992).

2.2 Successful Aging

Researchers have investigated what ingredients are keys to successful aging. They have found that successful aging is often related to high morale and life satisfaction (Teague

& MacNeil 1992). Therefore, maintaining high morale and life satisfaction in the elderly has been defined as a primary goal in leisure services targeted at the elderly. Adaptation has been viewed as an important process in successful aging. It is defined as a process of responding to the constantly changing demands of one's environment (Teague & MacNeil 1992). Both positive adaptation and negative adaptation can result, depending on one's ability to adjust to the changes. Three common sources of major adaptive change in later life have been identified (Rosenthal & Colangelo 1982): 1) sources related to the individual; 2) sources related to family; and 3) sources related to the social environment.

Although each of us has to adapt to changes, there is particular emphasis on adaptation in later life in the aging literature. This emphasis arises from the specific changes in physiological, psychological, and social facets of the lives of the elderly. McGrath (1970) indicated that stress can be induced when there is an imbalance between the need to change and the ability to change. Three threats have been identified in the changes (McGrath 1970):

1. Physical Threat—threats of injury, pain, or death.
2. Ego Threat—involving injury or pain to the psychological self.
3. Interpersonal Threat—disruption of social relationships.

Maladaptive coping procedures such as alcohol, drugs, and suicide can be adopted to cope with stress when the elderly fail to adapt to aging successfully. The most common psychological disorder among older people is depression (Teague & MacNeil 1992), which is perceived as being a negative adaptation to the changes. Four sources of negative adaptation in later life have been delineated by Teague & MacNeil (1992): 1) stress in later life; 2) lessened ability to cope with disruptive change; 3) loss of social supports; and 4) absence of socially defined norms and roles for elderly. Avoiding negative adaptation and pursuing positive adaptation in later life has been defined as a common goal for those servicing the elderly. It is believed that this approach will help them achieve successful aging.

3.0 METHODS

This study was undertaken in Tsuen Wan District in Hong Kong. Participants were recruited from different seating areas within the district's boundary which one of the authors observed to be gathering places. Those study areas are represented as black dots on the map in Figure 1. Interviews were conducted with 25 elderly participants.

Purposive sampling was applied in which respondents were chosen nonrandomly. The study's intent was to identify the range of perspectives that described the phenomenon of leisure and aging, rather than the distribution of these perspectives within a population. Hence, the number of participants was guided by the extent to which new interviewees added incrementally to the range of perspectives, rather than by an *a priori* determined sample size. After 20 interviews, relatively few new insights were forthcoming, so data collection was terminated after 25 interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, based on an interview guide of open-ended questions. They were tape-recorded unless respondents requested that this not occur. Note-taking was done for three interviews in which interviewees objected to being audio taped. Those interviews were transcribed from Cantonese to English immediately after the interviews to keep memory loss of data to a minimum.

4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Perceptions of Aging

Most participants reported that they felt old. Their reasons for feeling old included: increased age; deteriorated health condition; being unable to perform tasks which they could do as young adults; hair coloration; not having a job; slower motion; being less energetic; children having their own families; not able to work as fast as before; abundant life experience; and forgetfulness. These reasons are listed on the left side of Table 1. Although differences may exist among the elderly in different countries, some of the models which have been developed in western countries to explain aging appear to be appropriate for explaining perception of "oldness" of the elderly in Hong Kong. The corresponding models which can be used to interpret aging in Hong Kong based on the reasons provided by



Figure 1.—The area in which interviews were conducted.

respondents in this study are listed on the right side of Table 1.

4.11 Chronological Model

The chronological model (Gould 1975, Levinson et al. 1978, Iso-Ahola 1980) assigns ages to each life stage, and many respondents in this study classified themselves as “old” because of their chronological age. They categorized themselves into the older aged group and differentiated themselves from other age groups based on age differences. Therefore, the chronological model was used by some in Hong Kong to define aging.

4.12 Biological Model

The biological model of aging (Teaff 1985, Teague & MacNeil 1992, McGuire et al. 2004) defines “oldness” based on the physical characteristics of aged people.

Changes in physical body attributes were used to determine oldness by some of the sample including: declining health, hair coloration, and being less energetic. Thus, the biological model was used by some to define their “oldness.”

4.13 Behavioral Model

The behavioral model (Kalish 1982, McGuire et al. 2004) determines the oldness of a person based on the display of certain behavioral characteristics. Among such characteristics reported in this study were: inability to perform the same tasks which they could do when younger; slow motion; inability to work as fast as before; and forgetfulness. The changes caused some in the sample to realize they no longer had the capability to perform a task they did when they were young adults.

Table 1.—Perspective appropriate for defining “oldness” of the elderly in Hong Kong

Perspective which can be used to explain the “oldness” feeling	Reasons for the feeling of being old reported by the sample
Chronological model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increased age
Biological model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Declined health• Hair coloration• Being less energetic
Behavioral model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Unable to perform the same tasks which could be done in their young adulthoods• Slower motion• Cannot work as fast as before• Forgetfulness
Sociocultural model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Not having a job• Children have their own families
Personal model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different personalities led to different perceptions of aging

4.14 Sociocultural Model

The sociocultural model (Teague & MacNeil 1992) assigns various roles to different life stages. Some respondents in the study reported that they felt old because they were not working and their children had their own families. They recognized the change in their roles in their later life. They were no longer head of the household. When they were young, they worked and took care of their families. Loss of these roles made them feel that they were no longer young. Therefore, this model also could be used to explain perceptions of oldness.

4.15 Personal Model

The personal model (Teague & MacNeil 1992) suggests that people define their own perception of oldness. The findings of this study were based on self-reported interviews, and respondents frequently injected their personal feelings into perceptions of their oldness, recognizing their personalities were an influential factor in determining their perceptions of their aging. Given the same conditions, those who have more optimistic personalities were likely to be happier about their aging, while those who were pessimistic were more likely to feel miserable in their later lives. As a result, in the same age cohort, some respondents felt old while others do not.

The explanatory capacity of the models above suggests that, although the context of this study may be different from studies that have been conducted in other countries,

the basic conceptualizations which explain oldness are similar. The interview data also suggested the elderly's perception of oldness is explained by multiple conceptualizations rather than by a single model.

4.2 Life Satisfaction

Although some participants reported that they were satisfied with their life, others reported unhappiness. Depression, which has been reported as a common problem among the elderly in Hong Kong (Liu et al. 1993), was prevalent among interview respondents. Five reasons were identified as accounting for their depression: 1) limited financial ability; 2) feeling of loneliness; 3) lack of leisure skills; 4) dependency on others for care and financial income; and 5) lack of companionship.

4.21 Limited Financial Ability

Some who were constrained by limited financial ability were worried about their ability to survive. They either lived by themselves, or lived in an elderly care center. Most of them received only a small amount of financial assistance from the government.

4.22 Feeling of Loneliness

Most respondents indicated that they were occupied with working and family responsibilities before retirement. After retirement, they lost those roles. Often children established their own families and moved out. The feeling of loneliness led to life dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

4.23 Lack of Leisure Skills

Family-centeredness has always been central in Chinese society. Many participants indicated that they contributed most of their time when they were young to establishing a good quality of life for their family and children and did not plan for their later lives. They did not develop leisure skills in young adulthood. Their leisure activities tended to be highly routinized in later life. Although not all the activities reported by participants were the same, walking around, chatting with other elderly, going for Yum Cha, and watching television were common.

4.24 Dependency on Others

Chinese elderly are likely to be more dependent on others in their family for financial income compared to their western counterparts. Most Chinese elderly expect to be taken care of by their children in later life. However, a gradual diminishment of filial responsibility in Chinese society means that many children move out of their parents' house after getting married. The dependent characteristic which the society cultivated in the past leaves some elderly feeling miserable at its absence in later life.

4.25 Lack of Companionship

Some elderly remarked on their joy and happiness when they interacted with their children. One participant indicated that she eats only what she cooks for herself, since she does not like restaurant food. However, she goes for Yum Cha with her children even though she does not like the food in the restaurant since she wants to interact with her children. This illustrates her need for the companionship of her children. It is suspected that the need for companionship is especially strong among the elderly in Hong Kong, more so than in western countries, due to cultural differences. Therefore, the degree of benefit they receive from socialization when participating in leisure activities may also be greater.

5.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR LEISURE SERVICE DELIVERY

Three implications for leisure service delivery in Hong Kong emanated from the study: more research on aging and leisure should be conducted to facilitate

development of culturally sensitive models to guide leisure service delivery; leisure education through "informed" mechanisms for the elderly is needed to cultivate leisure interests; and a client-oriented approach should be adopted when delivering leisure services to them.

5.1 More Research on Aging and Leisure

Most elderly in Hong Kong aged 60 or over are retired from work, so they have more time for leisure. How they spend their time greatly influences their level of life satisfaction. Leisure has been found to be an important part of their later life. Neglecting the elderly's needs in leisure can lead to unhappiness and life dissatisfaction. To tailor leisure services for the elderly, leisure managers need to understand the aging phenomenon, and leisure constraints and benefits experienced by the elderly. Given the lack of research in Hong Kong, this study acts as a stepping stone in developing knowledge on leisure and aging. However, more research should be conducted to investigate a variety of topics, such as the interrelationship between aging and leisure, the role of leisure in later life, and how leisure service providers can help the elderly achieve successful aging.

5.2 Leisure Education

This study shows that many respondents do not integrate leisure habits into their lives. Their diminished social roles and inadequate knowledge of leisure led to their being bored in later life. When they were young, they did not have a chance to participate in leisure activities. Most of their time was occupied by work and taking care of house chores and their families. Therefore, they do not know how to spend their time in later life. Leisure education is necessary in order to help them build a healthy leisure habit, which can possibly enhance their life satisfaction and happiness. Given that most elderly in Hong Kong have little education, leisure education should be conducted informally instead of formally. For instance, television and outreach teams could be good media to convey leisure messages to the elderly on topics such as how to keep their bodies fit; encourage them to join free tours and participate in various leisure activities; inform them as to where traditional Chinese drama will be located, and so on.

When designing leisure services, leisure service providers should take the financial constraints of the elderly into consideration. The activities offered should be free or partially financially supported by the government in order to give leisure opportunities to those who lack financial resources.

5.3 Client-oriented Approach

The contemporary emergence of Benefit-Based Management (BBM) appears to offer a useful framework for guiding leisure service delivery for the Hong Kong elderly population. This approach has been applied by a number of agencies in Canada and the United States (Driver & Bruns 1999). Allen (1996) described BBM as a process which can be divided into three phases: benefit and opportunity identification; Implementation; and Evaluation and documentation. Adopting the BBM approach means identifying benefits that the elderly seek at the beginning of the process, and integrating those benefits into the design of a service. Managers should decide which benefits they want to be the end products of a service based on the needs of the elderly, and tailor services so they facilitate those benefits.

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