

What is Successful Aging? Views of Singaporeans

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Singapore elderly people wish for healthy, happy and independent lives, and meanwhile are eager for love from children, care from family and respect from society.

Successful aging is a leading concept of the aging studies in the Western societies. Is this concept applicable to Asia? How do Singaporeans perceive about this notion?

People tend to believe that diseases and disability could not be avoided in the aging process, and thus how to cure people with disease and disability becomes a long pursuit of medical science. However, in the year of 1987, two American scholars, Rowe and Kahn distinguished “successful” aging from “normal” aging. They propose that successful agers could be free from disease and disability. Their views divert research attention from pathologically impaired elderly individuals to “successful agers”, who are defined as those with less disease and disability, high level of cognitive and physical function, and active social engagement.

Should successful aging only be defined by professionals? This is a good question. Researchers found out that self-evaluated outcomes of successful aging often do not match the professional assessments. Old individuals with disability and disease, who are then unqualified as successful agers by academic criteria, may report a good quality of life and self-identify as successful agers; some successful agers classified by Rowe and Kahn’s definition may however report otherwise. These incongruities imply that lay perceptions of successful aging may go beyond the indicators established by the professional model.

Interestingly the lay perception on successful aging often vary by culture. Researchers found out that solo-living elders in Hong Kong tended to highlight filial piety of children in their perceptions of successful aging; Ogimi villagers in Japan considered the traditional weaving as one means towards successful aging; in Korea, many elders take the success of their children as the marker of their successful aging.

These interesting patterns encourage us to investigate how Singaporeans perceive successful aging. In the MOE-funded project, we interviewed about 50 elderly Singaporeans by different ethnicities and summarized 12 themes of successful aging from their narratives. Next, we conducted a national survey of about 1500 participants, in which respondents evaluated the importance of each theme. We found out these themes have three groups. The first group was mainly about self-sufficiency in later life, consisted of a series of idealized individual characteristics of old age such as “to be happy”, “to be physically mobile”, “to be free of diseases”, “to be financially secure”, and “to be independent in life”. The second group was basically about the maintenance of social function, with items such as “to be able to take care of other family members”, “to have friends”, “to be able to continue working” and “to engage in social activity”. The last group was concerned about availability of family support, with three items of “to have my spouse with me”, “to have children living together with me”, and “to have children taking care of me”.

The first group shows that the Singapore elderly holds similar ideas with the western standard; however the third group reveal some distinct values. We further found out that there should be at least half of elderly Singaporeans who simultaneously valued independence and dependence for successful aging. Such ambivalence in perception captures the complexity of lay views on successful aging in Singapore. The coexistence of two opposite attitudes was indeed not odd, because old Singaporeans expect care from children in old age, but at the same time do not want to become a burden for family.

In recent years, Rowe and Kahn further proposed Successful Aging 2.0 as the society-level evaluation standard of successful ageing. We argue that building a society of successful aging needs to be cautious about the local culture. Based on the findings of our study, as the eldercare function of family is highly valued by elderly Singaporeans, we think whether family delivers eldercare as expected by elderly should be used as a main marker of the society-level successful aging.