



A Study on the Pride of Elderly Fishermen: From the Sense of Distance from Old Age

Kasane Matsuzaki

Department of Nursing Science, Faculty of Nursing and Social Welfare Sciences, Fukui Prefectural University, Japan.

Article Details

Article Type: Research Article

Received date: 21st October, 2023

Accepted date: 31st October, 2023

Published date: 02nd November, 2023

***Corresponding Author:** Kasane Matsuzaki, Department of Nursing Science, Faculty of Nursing and Social Welfare Sciences, Fukui Prefectural University, Japan.

Citation: Matsuzaki, K., (2023). A Study on the Pride of Elderly Fishermen: From the Sense of Distance from Old Age. *J Comp Nurs Res Care* 8(1):190. doi: <https://doi.org/10.33790/jcnrc1100190>.

Copyright: ©2023, This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0](#), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Abstract

I have been conducting fieldwork in Mie Prefecture, Japan, to investigate the lives and fishing practices of elderly fishermen who fish in Ise Bay. This paper focuses on the initial interview with the head of a fishing union and a fisherman in his 90s (Mr. A). My research question at the time was how elderly fishermen were coping with their old age. However, they emphatically told me that Mr. A was in good health and had not aged at all. The purpose of this paper is to describe the way they introduced Mr. A. As the result, the following characteristics were observed. (1) On the topic of health, they try to dismiss old age as much as possible. (2) On the topic of the fishermen's skills, they positively acknowledge that Mr. A is old. These have already been pointed out in existing discussions too. But in addition to this, Mr. A also asserted that he is "easy-going" and "free" fisherman by admitting that he was frail due to his advanced age. This paper focuses on these three points and examines the aspect of his pride, which was constituted by their flexible sense of the distance from the image of old age.

Keywords: Fisherman, Pride, Old age, Fieldwork, Self-introduction

Introduction

I have been conducting fieldwork with elderly fishermen who have belonged to a fishermen's union in Mie Prefecture, Japan since 2020. When the research had just begun, I was introduced to an elderly fisherman in his 90s (hereinafter Fisherman A or Mr. A) by the head of the fishermen's union. My initial research goal was to find out how elderly fishermen continue to fish while coming to terms with their old age. However, what the union leader and the fisherman emphasized was how healthy they were and how they were not aged. The purpose of this paper is to describe the way they introduced themselves at that time. Through this, I will examine the aspect of their pride, which is composed of their flexible sense of distance from the image of old age.

Image of old age

In her book *The Coming of Age*, French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir wrote a shocking phrase, "Society looks upon old age as a kind of shameful secret that it is unseemly to mention" [1]. This is because in France in the 1970s, unemployed elderly people were "the most unfortunate, the worst-used of all" [1], suffering from poverty and loneliness. This indicates that in French society, in the midst of

industrial development, old age had such a strong negative connotation.

However, the way elderly people behave today is diverse, and it has become difficult to pinpoint a single image of old age. Healthy life expectancy is now much longer than in the past, and many elderly people are working, some through re-employment schemes and others by creating their own employment. Yet, for example, Levy et al., in their analysis of Facebook discourse, reported that in a total of 84 groups with 25,489 participants (average age 20 to 29), all but one of these groups' Description focused on negative age stereotypes. Specifically, 74% criticized the elderly, 27% infantilized them, and 37% advocated banning public activities such as shopping, according to the report [2]. Another study in 2021 of various media outlets in the UK and North America reported that the amount of negative descriptions about older adults was six times that of positive descriptions [3]. Many of these negative comments were related to physical aspects. Based on these surveys, it can be said that there is still a widespread image that old people are weaker than younger people, prone to illness, and unfit for social activities.

This is not irrelevant to us as nurses. Because, for example, I specialize in gerontological nursing, a discipline that has become increasingly important as the proportion of elderly people grows, and it is undeniable that the development of this academic field supports the image of the elderly as people in need of assistance. Therefore, I think how we nurses can relativize the image of old age is extremely important for re-understanding older adults.

Elderly's image of old age

As progress has been made in terms of research on the general image of aging, the image held by the elderly has also received attention in recent years. For example, Ron surveyed older adults in their 60s to 90s about their current attitudes and perceptions regarding aging. He reported that the positive aspects were described by only one expression, "splendor and glory," while the negative ones were more often described by words such as "fear" and "disgust" [4]. This suggests that even among the elderly, old age is talked about with a relatively negative connotation. Furthermore, Warmoth et al. (2015), through their review of previous research, found that many older adults viewed aging negatively and that their perceptions consisted of nine aspects: memory, cognitive abilities, physical and physiological abilities, medical conditions and outcomes, disability, care needs,

self-health assessment, quality of life and death [5]. In relation to this, Levy proposed Stereotype Embodiment Theory (SET) which explains the process by which these elderly stereotypes are internalized by the elderly. The process represents life-long internalization of the social elderly stereotype in older adults which is activated unconsciously and acquire associations with the self as they age, that would then affect various functions and health aspects [6]. Clarifying the aging process from the viewpoint of interaction with society, this theory is considered extremely effective in understanding the process by which people internalize negative stereotypes about the elderly [7].

The above research trend suggests that aging is a negative impression for the elderly as well, and that this perception is generated and internalized through interactions with society. Do the elderly have no choice but to accept the negative image of old age?

Pride of the elderly

On the other hand, some studies have reported that elderly people sometimes engage in behaviors that try to keep old age at bay. For example, experiments by Weiss et al. found that older adults who received negative information about their age began to avert their gaze from pictures of older people and to distance themselves from people their own age. Based on this finding, Weiss et al. say that feeling younger about themselves may help older adults maintain a positive view of themselves, despite loss that comes about with aging. Although the above kind of sudden action does not change the image of old age, it can be said that it is a practical way for them to live as an elderly person in today's society [8]. Furthermore, referring to a detailed review of previous studies on ageism and the Social Identity Theory proposed by Taifel and Turner [9], Lev, Wurm and Ayalon (2018) proposed the following three hypotheses as strategies for older people to preserve their identity:

First, older adults can use social mobility by avoiding identification with the old age group. They can achieve this goal by maintaining a youthful appearance and by avoiding behaviors associated with the old age group. Second, older adults can use social creativity by focusing on the positive attributes of aging or by comparing themselves with other less well-off older adults (e.g., a social downward comparison). Finally, older adults can act towards social change by stimulating social action in favor of changing the status of older people in society [10].

Sociologist Ajiki explains that all humans want to maintain a high attitude and "pride" is a refined and internalized version of this [11]. If so, the strategies for preserving one's identity that they present here can be directly translated into strategies for preserving one's pride among the elderly. Although these hypotheses have not yet been sufficiently verified, they should be useful as a reference when considering the cases of this paper where the fishermen were trying to present themselves in the best possible light to the researcher:

Furthermore, the psychology of elderly people, who move the image of old age away from or closer to themselves, remind me of the theory of fashion by a Japanese philosopher Kiyokazu Washida. Washida focuses on the fact that people often intentionally wear clothes untidily or wear clothes that don't fit them, and describes their keen sense of fashion as follows:

We should never become someone who is "within one's means" and easily tamed. We should never fit ourselves into a moderately sized, nice image, and just enjoy sound sleep there. We must constantly shake "ourselves" out of our proper selves and break down. (Omitted) To do this, we must maintain tension on the surface of our existence. The principle of fashion is to always maintain maximum tension on your surface (Washida 1995, 68-69, my translation).

The surface tension that Washida refers to here is not only one's appearance to others, but also a kind of bulwark to protect oneself from the outside world, in other words, one's own pride. We would like to make ourselves look better and embrace what's good for us,

and, at the same time, we try to push back against and reject the weird things that society forces on us. To achieve this, "surface tension" is always required, where there is a change in mindset, in which we would not simply conform to society's values and frameworks but try to successfully tame them to the contrary. Fashion referred to here, means this kind of sense of distance from the norms and values that make up society, and also a sense of distance from oneself [12].

Washida concludes his book with Paul Nizan's famous opening words from *Aden Arabia*, which he describes as "truly fashionable" (my translation) [12]. "I was twenty. I will let no one say it is the best time of life" [13].

From these words of Paul Nizan, we can feel a kind of spirit of resistance against the age of 20 being generally regarded as the "the best time of life." Washida seems to link this human psychology of resistance to existing concepts or frameworks with the spirit of trying to wear clothes in one's own way. Based on the above discussion, the next chapter will introduce the case studies.

Materials and methods

The interview was conducted in December 2020. It was an unstructured interview and took about 45 minutes. The location was the meeting room of the fishing union, and this was the first interview with Mr. A. In addition to the author and Mr. A, the head of the fishing union (a man in his 60s) who introduced Mr. A was also present. The interview data were described ethnographically, focusing on how they talk about old age.

Ethical considerations

The survey was conducted with the approval of the Clinical Research Ethics Review Committee of Suzuka University of Medical Science (Approval No. 453).

Results

The location where I have conducted research is a fishing port facing Ise Bay in the central region of Japan. Ise Bay is an inner bay that boasts one of the largest catches of fish in Japan. According to the fishermen, small fish, sea eels, prawns, and blue crabs have been caught here for a long time. For this reason, all the fishermen I met told me that their families have been fishermen for generations. In recent years, however, due to coastal reclamation, industrial effluents, and the Kuroshio Current's meandering currents, the catch has been declining, and the number of fishermen has been decreasing as well.

Mr. A was the only fisherman in the area in his 90s who caught sardines. Mr. A is a slender man who always wears jerseys from brands such as Adidas, and although he is a little unsteady, he is an impressive person as he walks with his hands in his pockets.

Below are a few scenes that are important in understanding Mr. A's sense of distance from aging.

Case 1

What I will focus on here is the scene when the three of us gathered in the room, and the interview began. At this time, the union leader first talked about Mr. A as follows:

This guy is still an active strong fisherman. He doesn't have bad eyesight either. There's nothing wrong with him. I'd like to make this person a model for a medical university. He can hear well, his mind is alert, and everything is excellent.

After hearing the above words, I asked Mr. A, "You don't see a doctor, do you?" However, he didn't seem to hear my question, so the union leader spoke to him again, "She is asking if you see a doctor." Then Mr. A spoke like this:

I haven't been to a hospital. How many years ago was the last time I went there? I fell from about a height of 4m. It was about three years ago. Compression fracture of the spine. So, I was hospitalized for about a month. Then I recovered.

When Mr. A said this, the union leader began speaking as if to supplement what Mr. A had said. He said that Mr. A broke a bone

when he was 88 years old but fully recovered. He also said that two years ago, when his blood was tested on a TV health program, Mr. A's vascular age was only 48 years old.

Mr. A continued speaking:

The bottom was concrete. When I went to the hospital, the plastic surgeon said, "Most people would have been dead by now," because I was hit in the head. I told him, "Forget it, I'll recover," and I guess it took until about December for my head to recover. It has healed nicely. Yes, I had an MR scan, and it was completely healed. The doctor said, "This is good." Nothing bad after that. I don't even catch a cold.

In the above story, when Fisherman A was introduced, I noted that they emphasized that he is physically young and has not experienced any signs of aging. Needless to say, when I heard this, I was taken aback from the very beginning of the interview, as I wanted to know how elderly fishermen deal with their old age. However, this was probably due to their thinking and consideration that I would most likely expect to be conducting interviews with elderly fishermen who are healthy. The leader of the union said, "I want him to be a model for a medical university," which suggests that he was chosen as a model case. And actually, the episodes they mentioned here had a very strong impact. They were stories that showed me what good shape Mr. A was in, being outside of the general image of an elderly person.

The story of Mr. A, as in this case, continues. Below, I take a look at how it was told.

Case 2

The following is what Mr. A said after talking a little about sardine fishing:

The other day, when I went to get my (driver's) license renewed, there was someone the same age as me. He was bent over and was walking with a waddle. Such a person came for his license renewal. I thought it dangerous. When I asked him, "How old are you?" he answered, "I'm 90," and I said, "Oh, 90? I'm 90 too." Then the (driving) school instructor said, "This guy's 90 is very different. I did rather well on the dementia test, too. So, I got the renewed license. Ha ha ha.

Mr. A laughed out loud and continued talking:

No one except me fish around here any longer, everyone is about 10 years different. If you got on a boat, you wouldn't be able to get any work done. Your legs swayed and swayed, and the boat is very unstable. Unless your lower body is strong, you wouldn't be able to get on a boat. You step over rocking boats. I'm so happy to be able to do that. Being on a boat requires skills, you have to maneuver it. Not only that, it would be easier during the day, but I'm on the boat at 3:30 in the morning, it's dark, you know, and I sail relying on lights, so if I couldn't see, I wouldn't be able to follow the other boat. If your eyesight is bad, you wouldn't be able to follow.

The two stories of Mr. A here show the way he divides things into "same" and "different" things, which reveals what he wanted to say.

In the first episode about the driver's license, a 90-year-old elderly person who was "the same age" as Mr. A appears. He had a hunched back and a fragile lower body, making him look like a typical elderly person. The instructor at the driving school compared him to Mr. A and said that they were "very different." In other words, this story encouraged me to understand that although Mr. A was an elderly person, the image of his functional decline that is typical of an elderly person should not be included in my understanding. As a side note, I was a little surprised when I first heard about the driver's license renewal. This is because in recent years in Japan, traffic accidents caused by elderly people have often made headlines, and an increasing number of elderly people are voluntarily surrendering their licenses to prevent such accidents. From Mr. A's story, however, it is obvious that there were no particular problems with his function during the examination for the license renewal.

In the second episode, on the contrary, the preface is that Mr. A is "different" in age from the other fishermen by about 10 years, in other words, Mr. A is far older than the other fishermen. Sardine fishing is a fishing method called seining, in which two boats are run side by side and the sardines trapped in the net between them are caught. Fish, like people, move slower at night, making them easier to catch. Despite his advanced age, his ability to hop from one boat to the other in rough seas and maneuver his boat in the dark shows that he is no less able than other young men in the same work.

In this way, by acknowledging that he is an elderly person, and keeping the negative image of old age away, while projecting the image of an adult who is still a member of the working generation, Mr. A expressed how energetic an elderly person he is.

Mr. A's narrative emphasized how young and energetic he is, but on other topics, he talked openly about his advanced age. I will now look at those situations (Case 3 and Case 4).

Case 3

The topic shifted to sardine fishing. He told me he went fishing about three days a week. The following is what the union leader said afterwards:

The other day, the two of them caught 2 million in three days. In three days. Together, they catch about 10 million to 15 million in a year. He wouldn't do tiring work like seaweed, though. He must enjoy following the net and the catch. He forgets aging. Nowadays, we have radar, fishery detectors, and all sorts of other things, you see? He has all of that stuff in his head. You know, fish will move to various places to avoid being caught. He anticipates their moves and catches them quickly, proactively. You know, he has a hunch from his experience, and he does a good job. This way of fishing is totally different from the way of 18- or 19-year-olds. Intuition counts a lot.

The narrative here explains how well Mr. A earns money by fishing sardines. According to the union leader, Mr. A is still earning a considerable amount of money even in his 90s. And the reason he can do this is because he is able to read the movements of fish using his highly developed intuition, something that is difficult for young fishermen of around 20 years old. In other words, Mr. A and others, who had previously pushed talk about old age away and brought young age closer to themselves, are now dismissing youth and talking about being old as being good. This means Mr. A and the union leader do not reject all aspects of old age, but actively accept the positive aspects as their own.

Case 4

Following Case 3, this scene is after Mr. A told about how to harvest seaweed and to fish for sardines. Once the conversation had calmed down, I asked Mr. A, "Is it possible for me to accompany you on your sardine fishing trip?" Mr. A replied:

That's fine, but my fishing season ends in December, and I will be off again until July. I don't do much other work. Those who catch shellfish will start collecting shellfish again around April, but I don't do seaweed any longer and have also stopped collecting shellfish. I only work six months in a year. I start preparing in June and go fishing from July.

Mr. A said, "I'm a really, easy-going old man," and continued:

If there are sardines after the New Year, I may go and get them. But it's too cold, isn't it? If you are over 90 and go to such a cold place, you will be sick, won't you? I won't go there anymore. I could have gone today too. I was there until yesterday. I told him that we had to stop. I can decide freely. It's easy going. No one tells me I have to come out again tomorrow.

Here, Mr. A says that he has decided to take a break from fishing because it is already the cold season. Needless to say, when I heard this, I was at a loss because, I wanted to see the fishing in this area to learn more about it. However, I would like to focus on another aspect of Mr. A's narrative here, which differs from the previous one in that Mr. A admits that he is old and weak.

Mr. A said that he would not go sardine fishing anymore, which he had been doing before. This is partly because of his physical limitations, as he is over 90 years old and would "be sick" if he went fishing. However, it is clear that he is talking about it as a "free" choice allowed to an elderly person with such a weakness. If you are a physically strong adult, your family still expects that you earn money even if you have to strain yourself. In the case of seaweed cultivation, it is the coming cold season when high quality seaweed can be harvested, so it is necessary for the farmer to put all his energy into his work. However, Mr. A is no longer forced to fish, and it is a privilege of his advanced age that he is able to do so in an "easy-going" manner. Or perhaps he was using it as an excuse for me whom he has only just become acquainted with, to hold off for the time being on boarding the boat with him. But, in any case, it can be said that here Mr. A is actively applying himself to the image of a vulnerable elderly person.

Discussion

So far, I have featured several scenes from interviews with Fishermen A and others, that relate to how they talk about old age I will discuss these below based on what I considered in the Introduction.

As can be seen from the four cases, while Mr. A was trying to distance himself from the negative image of old age depending on the context of the story, he was also trying to apply the image of old age to himself. Specifically, he talked about how he was still an active fisherman and can fish just as well as younger fishermen. He also compared himself to someone who looked like an elderly person walking with a hunched back and waddles and highlighted the differences between them. At the same time, he focused on the positive aspects of old age, saying he has more skilled fishing techniques than younger people and saw the positive aspects of being old. These words and actions of Mr. A were consistent to some extent with points (1) and (2) of Lev et al.'s strategy for elderly people to maintain their identity. In other words, (1) gaining social mobility by maintaining a youthful appearance and avoiding elderly behavior, and (2) Leveraging social creativity by focusing on the positive aspects of aging and comparing oneself to older people who are less wealthy than oneself [10].

What I can say from this is that Mr. A is not a person who just obediently accepts the negative images of old age that are prevalent in the world as described in the SET theory. By keeping old age away from him as much as possible and recognizing only the good parts of it, he was able to make choices and present himself in a better light to the author/the researcher. It is considered that Mr. A's strategy was to maintain his pride in a situation where he was forced to become acutely aware of his old age in front of a researcher from a medical university.

However, it is also true that Mr. A's behavior could not be fully explained by the hypothesis above. In this article, I would like to focus on Mr. A's words and actions as seen in Case 4. Here, he said his body is weaker than that of young people, which is precisely why his job as a fisherman is "easy" and "free." Returning to what I said earlier, the three strategies mentioned above were about whether to connect or reject the image of old age with one's own identity. In other words, it was still an extension of the dichotomous debate about whether or not people should internalize old age. However, the issue here is not whether one's identity is tied to old age. Rather, Mr. A secures his identity as a "free and easy-going fisherman" by intentionally using the negativity of old age as a shield or armor.

This is probably what Washida refers to above, when it comes to "wearing" old age as a fashion. By skillfully embracing the concept of old age, he overturns this negativity in a cool way. This cannot be expressed simply in binary terms, such as wearing clothes or taking them off. We can see here his exquisite sense of distance from old age. What matters is how you dress and present yourself to others by taming and wearing it well. When Mr. A said, "I'm a really, easy-going old man" it was the moment when he wore the clothes of old age in a very fashionable way.

Conclusion

Mr. A's, and others' narratives, were basically about trying to distance themselves from old age as much as possible, but, on the other hand, if it was more convenient for them to be old, they would rather proactively position themselves as an elderly person. In addition, Mr. A also said that the negative aspects of old age, such as physical weakness, have brought about an "easy-going" and "free" life.

I believe that Mr. A's flexible sense of distance towards old age was a reaction that was created on the spur of the moment in an interview conducted by the author, a researcher affiliated with a medical university, in a situation where he had to face old age and health. We, as medical professionals, tend to apply an image of aging to the elderly, but this paper shows that they can manipulate this image and create their own selves. In other words, what this paper shows is Mr. A's "fashionable" pride in his attempt to tame the image of old age and speak well of himself.

Conflict of Interest: The author declare that they have no competing interests.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank everyone who participated in this survey. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI, Grant Number 20K23210.

Reference

1. Beauvoir, S. D. (1996). *The Coming of Age* (O'Brian, Patrick, Trans.). New York: W W Norton & Company.
2. Levy, B. R., Chung, P. H., Bedford, T., & Navrazhina, K. (2014). Facebook as a site for negative age stereotypes. *The Gerontologist*, 54(2), 172-176.
3. Ng, R. (2021). Societal age stereotypes in the US and UK from a media database of 1.1 billion words. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(16), 8822.
4. Ron, P. (2007). Elderly people's attitudes and perceptions of aging and old age: the role of cognitive dissonance?. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry: A journal of the psychiatry of late life and allied sciences*, 22(7), 656-662.
5. Warmoth, K., Tarrant, M., Abraham, C., & Lang, I. A. (2016). Older adults' perceptions of ageing and their health and functioning: A systematic review of observational studies. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 21(5), 531-550.
6. Levy, B. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current directions in psychological science*, 18(6), 332-336.
7. Shimizu, Y., Hashimoto, T., & Karasawa, K. (2021). The complementation of the stereotype embodiment theory: Focusing on the social identity theory. *Journal of Human Environmental Studies*, 19(1), 9-14.
8. Weiss, D., & Freund, A. M. (2012). Still young at heart: negative age-related information motivates distancing from same-aged people. *Psychology and aging*, 27(1), 173.
9. Taifel, H. & Turner, J. (1979). An Interative Theory of Intergroup Conflict. In M. J. Hatch and M. Schulz (eds.) *Organizational Identity: A Reader* (pp.56-65). New York: Oxford University Press.
10. Lev, S., Wurm, S., Ayalon, L. (2018). Origins of Ageism at the Individual Level. In L. Ayalon, and C. Tesch-Römer (eds.) *Contemporary Perspectives on Ageism* (pp.51-72). Cham: Springer.
11. Ajiki, M. (1986). *Pride: Genndaijin no Seisinnigaku* [Pride: Psychiatry for Modern Human]. Tokyo: Chukou-shinnsyo, inc.
12. Wasida, K. (1995). *Chiguhagu na Shinntai: Fashion te Nani?* [Mismatched Body: What is Fashion?]. Tokyo: Chikumashobou, inc.
13. Nizan, P. (1968). *Aden, Arabie* (Maspero, François, Trans.). New York: Monthly Review Press.