“Successful aging through the eyes of Alaska Natives”

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Background – why I did this study

- Elders are critical to the social and cultural values of villages.
- There is very little research on ethnic minority elders and how they subjectively define a successful older age.
- The lack of a minority definition lumps them together with a generic definition by Rowe & Kahn and most likely portrays them as aging less successful than their non-minority counterparts.
What is Successful Aging?

• There is not a well-accepted definition or model of successful aging that has stood the test of time.

• The leading researchers, Rowe & Kahn (1987),* define successful aging as consisting of the following criteria:
  – Low risk of disease
  – Low risk of disease-related disability
  – High mental and physical function
  – Active engagement in life

• According to Thomas A. Glass (2003), successful aging is something beyond health and longevity; it is rooted in the broader definition of the “good life” in late life.

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What is Successful Aging? cont’d

• Successful aging is what older adults value in the quality of their life and their death.

• According to Dilip V. Jeste (2005)*, there are difficulties in studying successful aging; there is no agreement on the nomenclature, let alone the definition and criteria for this entity.

• Also known as: healthy aging, productive aging, effective aging, aging well, robust aging, and positive aging.

Research question

How do Alaska Native elders subjectively define a successful older age?
Methodology and data collection

• A qualitative non-experimental research design
• Data was gathered through individual interviews of community residents who were considered an elder by their community.
• Interviews consisted of a demographic data sheet, open and closed-ended questions (20), and debriefing questions (3).
Methodology, cont’d

• The pilot study interviewed a purposive sample of eight (8) elders in order to determine the feasibility and culturally appropriateness of using the Cultural Consensus Model (Bernard, H.R., 1988)*.

• Elders were volunteers from the Fairbanks area representing four (Aleut, Athabascan, Inupiaq, Yup’ik) cultural groups with a mean age of 75 and an age range of 62 to 84

Methodology, cont’d

• Grounded Theory “is a research methodology for developing theory by letting the theory emerge from the data or be ‘grounded’ in the data” (Monette et al., 2002, 226)*.

• Theory development occurs in the midst of data collection, rather than taking place after the data collection.

Pilot study findings

• The interviews with the elders indicated that much of how one views whether or not they are aging successfully is based on personal responsibility and cognitions.

  – “Making a continuous contribution as long as possible. Have to get rid of bad thoughts or you will get sick.” (Mary Jane Nielson, Naknek, age 62).

  – “Aging where you feel good about yourself. You’ve completed the circle, back to the drum handle.” (Oscar Kawagley, Yup’ik, age 73).

  – “Taking care of yourself in a very clean and healthy life.” (Isabelle Kayotuk, Huslia).
Most elders stated that reaching a certain age (e.g. 65) does not determine their status as an elder, but rather the wisdom and experiences they gain throughout life.

“*We give and we gain wisdom. Some people just get old and don’t give.*” (Elizabeth Fleagle, Inupiaq, age 72).

“It’s not age. It’s having the DO’s and DON’T’s of your own culture. Some of us merely become elderly, but not an elder.” (Oscar Kawagley, Yup’ik, age 73).

“It is not age. We can grow old and not be an elder. It is the knowledge and skills we attain throughout the life. Learn values of our culture and are happy with our lives.” (George Charles, Sugpiaq, age 66).
Pilot study findings, cont’d

• When asked where the elders received most of their information on how to age successfully, most responded that they learned from other elders and family members they grew up with.

  – “Think about my grandfather who aged well even though his body was giving out.” (George Charles, Sugpiaq, age 66).

  – “I look and listen to people.” (Oscar Kawagley, Yup’ik, age 73).

• Participants did not state this specifically in their interviews, but most hope to serve as an example of successful aging for future generations.
Pilot study findings, cont’d

• This pilot study illustrates the importance of allowing elders to define successful aging, but the questions need to focus more specifically on the role the community plays in how they view aging as well as differentiate between aging in rural versus urban communities.

• This pilot study will guide the larger dissertation study on successful aging among Alaska Natives in Bristol Bay and its implications on future generations as our concepts of aging change and more people relocate to urban communities.
Reflections on study

• Many elders were unfamiliar with the term “successful aging.”
  • Possible use of vignettes to illustrate concept of successful aging and poor aging.
• Redundancy of questions in CCM questionnaire.
• More questions on differences in aging in rural versus urban communities.
• Future research with an international comparative study with other Indigenous communities in the circumpolar North.
“Live a simple life. Live off the land and be a hard worker. Don’t forget where you come from and who you are.”

Elizabeth Fleagle, Inupiaq

Howard Luke, Athabascan
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