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Perception of aging among Korean undergraduate nursing students*

Percepção do envelhecimento, entre coreanos estudantes de graduação em enfermagem

La percepción del envejecimiento entre los estudiantes universitarios coreanos de enfermería

Kae-Hwa Jo¹, Gyeong-Ju An²

ABSTRACT

Objective: To explore perceptions of aging among Korean undergraduate nursing students. **Methods:** The participants for the study were 102 undergraduate nursing students, selected from two universities in Korea. The questions were non-structured, open-ended in order for the students to make sufficiently complete statements regarding their experiences with aging. **Results:** The collected materials were classified into 4 themes, 13 sub-themes and 30 meaning units. Four themes emerged: *fullness*, *emptiness*, *transference*, and *desirability*. Most nursing students perceived aging positively as *fullness* and *desirability*, which are influenced by Confucianism. **Conclusion:** In conclusion, Confucianism as a cultural context should be considered to develop strategies for promoting a positive perception of aging in Korea.

Keywords: Aging; Perception; Qualitative research; Students, nursing

RESUMO

Objetivo: Explorar a percepção sobre envelhecimento entre alunos de graduação em Enfermagem de duas universidades da Coreia do Sul. **Métodos:** Pesquisa de abordagem qualitativa, do tipo descritivo com amostra de 102 graduandos em Enfermagem, selecionados com base em duas universidades desse país. As cinco questões utilizadas na pesquisa foram abertas, não estruturadas para possibilitar que os estudantes relatassem de modo completo suas experiências sobre envelhecimento; os relatos, obtidos entre os meses de setembro e novembro de 2010, foram submetidos à análise de conteúdo. **Resultados:** Os materiais coletados foram classificados em quatro temas: *plenitude*, *vazio*, *transferência* e *conveniência*. A maioria dos estudantes de enfermagem percebeu o envelhecimento de forma positiva em relação à *plenitude* e *conveniência*, que são influenciados por valores do confucionismo. **Conclusão:** O confucionismo deve ser considerado como um contexto cultural para desenvolver estratégias de promoção de percepção positiva do envelhecimento na Coreia do Sul.

Descritores: Envelhecimento; Percepção; Pesquisa qualitativa; Estudantes de enfermagem

RESUMEN

Objetivo: Explorar la percepción sobre el envejecimiento entre alumnos de pregrado en Enfermería de dos universidades de Corea del Sur. **Métodos:** Investigación con abordaje cualitativo, de tipo descriptivo realizado con una muestra de 102 graduandos en Enfermería, seleccionados en dos universidades de ese país. Las cinco preguntas utilizadas en la investigación fueron abiertas, no estructuradas para posibilitar que los estudiantes relaten de modo completo sus experiencias sobre envejecimiento; los relatos, obtenidos entre los meses de setiembre y noviembre del 2010, fueron sometidos al análisis de contenido. **Resultados:** Los materiales recolectados fueron clasificados en cuatro temas: *plenitud*, *vacío*, *transferencia* y *conveniencia*. La mayoría de los estudiantes de enfermería percibió al envejecimiento de forma positiva en relación a la *plenitud* y *conveniencia*, que son influenciados por valores del confucionismo. **Conclusión:** El confucionismo debe ser considerado como un contexto cultural para desarrollar estrategias de promoción de percepción positiva del envejecimiento en Corea del Sur.

Descriptores: Envejecimiento; Percepción; Investigación cualitativa; Estudiantes de enfermería

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INTRODUCTION

Longevity is considered one of the five great blessings of life in traditional Korean culture. Elders enjoy the power and authority awarded to them and maintained by the Confucian virtue of *filial piety*, which has long been a dominant feature of Korean culture ⁽¹⁾. Family is of outmost importance to Koreans, as is obedience and respect for elderly people. Respect for the elderly and the high value placed on interpersonal relationships comes from Confucianism. For example, young Koreans usually give up their seats out of respect for an elderly person on a crowded bus or subway train.

Older Koreans belong to a generation that experienced both World War II and the Korean War, as well as numerous changes brought about by the cultural, political, economic, industrial, and educational upheavals that occurred in most Westernized societies during the past 50 years ⁽²⁾. This rapid social change led to the development of a blend of traditional Korean and modern Western cultural values. Meanwhile, the elderly population aged 65 and over increased to 10.7% of the total population in Korea ⁽³⁾. Stereotypes and beliefs regarding aging not only influence societal behaviors and treatment of the elderly, but can also have a profound impact upon an individual's personal aging experience ⁽⁴⁾. With the increase in the number of elderly within society, it is essential to gain a more thorough understanding of the aging experience in order to ensure better care for the elderly, as well as for ourselves in the future ⁽⁵⁾.

Due to a rapid socioeconomic development within a short period of time, a recent study suggested that a majority of Korean adults tended to have a negative perception of the elderly, and considered them to be weak, incapable, stubborn, and resistant to change ⁽⁶⁾. In addition, a survey of attitudes toward aging showed that Korean undergraduate students had serious negative prejudices against aging, and considered the elderly boring, inflexible, dependent, conservative, unattractive, and miserable ^(6,7). These negative perceptions are believed to be due to a combination of the lack of education on this subject and the effects of rapid industrialization and modernization.

Attitudes toward the elderly tend to be the most positive during childhood; however, these may become negative as people get older ⁽⁷⁾. The experience of living with elderly people, frequent contact, relationships with elderly people, home education, and mass media are elements that appear to influence perceptions of aging ⁽⁸⁾. Moreover, results from previous research on beliefs regarding aging and attitudes toward the elderly within Asian cultures have been found to be complex and inconsistent ⁽⁴⁾. There were significant differences in anxiety toward aging between American and Korean adults ⁽⁹⁾.

Therefore, attitudes toward aging differ according to culture; however, there have been no studies based on Korean culture. Research on perceptions of aging

must account for the context and importance of culture. However, most studies have been quantitative in nature; thus, it has been difficult to assess the perspective of undergraduate nursing students with regard to the elderly. Qualitative research methods are valuable in highlighting experiences and permitting more nuanced interpretations. Therefore, understanding the perception of undergraduate nursing students toward aging is critical for predicting the issues that may emerge in an aging society in the future. The aim of this study was to explore perceptions of aging among Korean undergraduate nursing students.

METHODS

This study was a qualitative study using content analysis of statements made by Korean undergraduate nursing students regarding their perceptions of aging. For this study, 102 participants were selected by recruiting via the bulletin board of two universities in Korea, all of whom agreed to participate in the study. An information sheet explaining the purpose of the study was provided to the participants. The data for this study was collected in the form of student essays, written between September and November 2010. An orientation was provided to participants in order to enable them to express their experiences with regard to aging. The survey was conducted on the basis of the questions shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Open-ended questions for perception of aging

What are your feelings about aging?
What images do you have about aging?
How do you think of an elderly person when you see him or her?
What images do you have about the elderly?
What do you think about your own aging?

The questions were unstructured and open-ended to enable the students to make sufficiently complete statements regarding their experiences. Submitted materials were read and organized by two researchers, using the content analysis procedure detailed below.

Qualitative content analysis is a method of managing and interpreting narrative materials, which has been associated with coding and classifying processes used in some types of qualitative research ⁽¹⁰⁾. Content analysis was useful for this study because it is an unobtrusive method of analysis that can easily accommodate large amounts of data ⁽¹¹⁾. The essays of the participants were analyzed using the qualitative content analysis process based on Graneheim and Lundman ⁽¹²⁾. This study adopted four aspects of trustworthiness as proposed by Guba: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability ⁽¹³⁾. To enhance the credibility of this study, the researcher used the strategies of obtaining feedback from three participants. To increase transferability, the researcher provided a clear and detailed description of the researcher's role, sampling process, data

collection methods, and data analysis methods. To increase dependability, the researcher coded all the essay data until the findings were consistent over time.

1) The first step includes selecting the *meaning unit*, that is, the constellation of words that relate to the same central meaning, which is referred to as a *coding unit*. In this study, both researchers considered the meaning unit as “aging,” “the elderly,” and “agedness,” and the subset of data were analyzed from the open-ended questionnaires.

2) To enhance confirmability, 10 materials were coded independently by two researchers, and inter-coder reliability was calculated using an on-line calculator (accessible at <http://cosmion.net/jeroen/software/kappa/>). Cohen's kappa values were .93, which was regarded as satisfactory⁽¹⁴⁾. After sufficient consistency was achieved, both researchers read each complete essay. Each then proceeded to independently categorize material based on themes that evolved from the data.

3) Once both researchers were satisfied with their categorization, they exchanged work and reviewed categories determined by the other researcher. Agreement was sought between the two researchers through discussion and consensus.

4) After achieving agreement on the main themes, researchers moved to build consensus on subthemes, by clustering meaning units that were indicative of each of the subthemes. In total, 30 meaning units were categorized into 13 subthemes under the 4 main themes.

This study was conducted after approval from the institutional review board of the university ethics committee (CR-10-043-RES-01-R). Participation of this study was voluntary, and no compensation was given. Each participant received a copy of informed consent forms and a brief explanation that the material provided on aging would not be used for any other purpose except this research. The participants were informed that their confidentiality would be maintained and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Those students who took part gave informed consent, and this process was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration. After completing the open questionnaire, the participants returned them to a collection box in sealed envelopes in an anonymous manner.

RESULTS

The participants' ages ranged from 19 to 28 years (men = 3; women = 99). Of the participants, 12.7% (n = 13) were in first year, 34.3% (n = 35) were in the second year, 37.3% (n = 38) were in the third year, and 15.7% (n = 16) were in their fourth year. A qualitative content analysis was conducted to sort statements from 102 participants into 4 themes, 13 sub-themes, and 30 meaning units as shown in Table 2. The four themes were: *fullness*, *emptiness*, *transference*, and *desirability*.

Table 2. Qualitative content analysis of the perceptions of aging

Themes	Sub-themes	Meaning units	Frequency (%)
Fullness	Gallantry	– Writing a new history – Warm smiles and wrinkles bear witness to sacrifice and joy – A mark of honor for enduring hardship	26(25.4)
	Freedom	– Comfortable, just like sitting in an easy chair – Reward after the hardships of life	10(9.8)
	Wisdom	– Advisors who can give tips and advice on life – Getting older means getting wiser	19(18.6)
	Maturity	– Just like a wine maturing – Deep and widened perspective of the world	46(45.1)
Emptiness	Powerlessness	– Becoming ill – No money – Loss of leadership – Reliance on children	45(44.1)
	Loneliness	– Separation from family – Lonely because too much time spent alone	35(34.3)
	Despair	– Children do not look after you as expected – People consider aging to be a “great social illness” and “social burden”	7(6.8)
	Nature	– Aging is neither a bad nor a good thing; it is a natural phenomenon – The providence of nature is that nothing is permanent – Think of aging as one part of the evolutionary process	43(42.1)
Transference	Life process	– Getting old is a part of life that has been lived diligently – Old age is not an ugly thing that is trivial or you want to throw away.	29(28.4)
	Preparation for death	– Preparation for a return to nature – Getting closer to death and feel bitter about time passing	9(8.8)
	Reconciliation	– Old age is a blessed time for reflecting on the past and forgiving past conflict	20(19.6)
Desirability	Acceptance	– We should welcome aging honorably, confidently, and without regret – Enjoy it as it cannot be avoided	28(27.4)
	Role model	– I want to be an old person with a big heart who can embrace others – I want to be a dignified elderly with a refined and tidy appearance – It would be good to have self-respect on what I achieved when I was younger	42(41.1)

Fullness

It appears that *fullness* was associated with gallantry, freedom, wisdom, and maturity.

The meaning units included: "aging is warm smiles" and "wrinkles bear witness to sacrifice and joy," "Aging is being comfortable, just like sitting in an easy chair," "Getting older means getting wiser," and "Aging gives people a deep and widened perspective of the world."

Participants whose perceptions of aging were of *fullness* held positive views that valued old age, and were gained from the lives of their parents and elderly people. They recognized old age as a period of rest, retirement from youthful hardships, and a time to reflect on life.

Emptiness

The theme that was expressed as *emptiness* included: powerlessness, loneliness, and despair.

Emptiness was based on experiences and circumstances where participants did not feel positive with regard to aging. Relevant meaning units included: "Aging means becoming ill," "Aging makes people feel lonely because of too much time spent alone," "Aging people have no money," and "People consider aging to be a great social illness and social burden."

The *emptiness* that the participants spoke of indicated interdependent personal and social structural aspects, and focused on the external aspects of aging while ignoring the internal ones. A display of negative emotions revealed prejudice in the participants' perception of aging.

Transference

Transference was expressed as being natural, a life process, and preparation for death. *Transference* was the participants' description of the inevitability and universality of aging. Meaning units within this theme included: "Aging is neither a bad nor a good thing; it is a natural phenomenon," "Getting old is part of the life process," and "Aging is preparation for a return to nature." In their acceptance of aging, these participants displayed a neutral attitude toward aging as being the order of nature.

Desirability

Desirability was based on efforts to achieve the ideal, and participants described images of their own aging process. *Desirability* was expressed as reconciliation, acceptance, and role modeling. The meaning units of this theme included: "Old age is a blessed time for reflecting on the past and forgiving past conflict", "Enjoy it as it cannot be avoided", and "I want to be an old person with a big heart who can embrace others." Participants stated that the challenge of this study was to create a self-portrait, because in the future they will also become old; moreover, they displayed a wish to maintain and strengthen ideal images of aging.

DISCUSSION

The perception of participants regarding *fullness* was mostly positive depending on individual circumstances and experiences. In Korean culture, the elderly are respected and given special treatment. According to Confucianism, after the age of seventy, one can purify his or her mind and free the self from negative thoughts. The real self becomes outwardly apparent after it reconnects with the Ultimate and accepts the self and others. Participant statements such as, "Aging is comfortable, just like sitting in an easy chair" appeared to portray a generous and positive image of aging and indicated that they are not expected to accomplish any more or work to be recognized by others. It means that retirement and detachment from worldly situations may be beneficial during this stage, based on Confucianism⁽¹⁵⁾. They recognize old age as a period of rest, retirement from youthful hardships, and a time to reflect on life.

The negative aspects of the deteriorating status of aging emerge as *emptiness*. In Korean society, people are attached to others and create a sense of closeness in their relationships by sharing interests and possessions with family and friends. However, when they grow older and weaker, the attachment and sense of closeness begins to deteriorate. Consequently, they become sad, which can cause emotional conflicts⁽¹⁶⁾. In addition, rapidly changing values and lifestyles undermine the experience and wisdom of the elderly, and society may view the elderly as pathetic, dependent, and worthless⁽¹⁷⁾. The participants' perception of *emptiness* may be caused by other people-oriented emotions such as the emergence of comparison objects, awareness of others, comparison with others, and inferiority⁽¹⁸⁾. In western societies, older people have been viewed in terms such as *burdensome* and *dependent*. Conversely, traditional Korean society placed elderly people on a pedestal⁽⁷⁾. Confucianism still serves as the standard of moral and social conduct for many people. Respect for elderly people is an integral part of Confucian doctrine, especially for the family patriarch. Despite the phenomenon of filial piety losing its persuasive power in a rapidly changing social environment in Korea, *desirability* displayed the participants' will and resolution to strengthen their sense of respect for the elderly. Confucianism views the adult children's obligation to care for aging parents as natural reciprocation for the care they received when they were helpless. *Desirability* implies that aging does not entail giving up on life, and suggests that aging is a process of finding new life through active effort in a changed environment⁽¹⁹⁾. The elderly participate in charitable work for the society and find joy in sharing their experience and knowledge; in this manner they are able to maintain their confidence and dignity as they grow old. Korean society recognizes the

elderly as role models for the younger generation⁽²⁰⁾ and views aging as the desirability of a mature life.

The concept of aging should begin with an understanding of the unique cultural context of the Korean society. For Koreans, the key elements of success are family values and relationships; thus, the cultural elements for successful aging are family relationships⁽²¹⁾. To a certain extent, this may be viewed as a reflection of Confucian ideals that emphasize relationships. Themes such as *fullness* and *desirability* are based on Korean culture, which is sensitive to social demands, relationship-oriented morality, and harmony. In western cultures, the factors for successful aging are perceived to be more self-centered because one's self evaluation is more important than gaining recognition from other people⁽²²⁾. In contrast to Western cultures, Eastern societies are perceived to possess a more positive view of aging. Such perceptions are generally derived from the strong influence of Confucianism, which emphasizes notions of respect for the elderly and has promoted a more esteemed status for elders in Korea⁽⁵⁾. Unlike negative attitudes toward the elderly among nursing students in previous quantitative research, this study represents Korean nursing students who still believe in elder respect influenced by Confucian philosophy. Today, Confucianism does not have such a large meaning for the younger generation, but some manners and thoughts based on Confucian values are still regarded as important things⁽¹⁵⁾. Agism can encourage unfair treatment of elderly people as well as inhibit effective policy decisions⁽⁶⁾. It influences the nursing profession to work towards a change of attitude among nursing colleagues, government and community power

brokers to one which values the important work being undertaken in care for the aged. Therefore, the findings of the present study on the perception of ageing can enable the initiation of nursing strategies in cultural contexts with elderly respect based on Confucianism.

This study has some limitations that should be considered in interpreting its findings. First, it is tempting to draw conclusions based on frequency data to demonstrate the magnitude of a response, but doing so is unjustified. Second, we did not know the saturation of the data compared with the other qualitative research because the sentences of essays were too short to analyze adequately.

CONCLUSIONS

This study used a qualitative content analysis to explore Korean undergraduate students' perceptions of aging. The outcome of the content analysis was classified into 4 themes (*fullness*, *emptiness*, *transference*, and *desirability*), 13 sub-themes and 30 meaning units. Korean undergraduate students perceived that aging is *fullness* with results during past life, *emptiness* with despair about children, and *desirability* as a role model for young people positively based on Confucianism. The present study is significant in that it sheds new light on the social issues from a cultural viewpoint through the content analysis of statements expressed by Korean undergraduate nursing students on ageing. These findings will contribute to establishing strategies for nursing education in the field of care for the elderly in Korea. The findings of this research suggest a cross-cultural comparative study of perceptions on ageing among undergraduate nursing students from Western cultures.

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