

Aging as a symbolic cognitive construction: A case of elderly self-identity in the rural elderly-service stations in Beijing

The proportion of the elderly population aged 65 years and over in China's rural areas to the total rural population is 17.72 percent, which is 6.61 percentage points higher than the proportion of the elderly population aged 65 years and over in urban areas to the total urban population. Aging is one of the most important challenges of this century (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020). This paper argues that aging is not only the aging of the human body in the physiological process (M. Kaeberlein et al, 2015), but also carries mythological significance with multiple signifier and signified meanings in different cultures and social constructions. Myths arise from deep cultural needs and are conveyed through symbolic expressions, serving as symbolic acts that communicate abstract ideas and values through concrete imagery and narratives (Barthes, 1957). Within myth theory, the signifier of aging includes physical characteristics such as grey hair, wrinkles, and a decrease in mobility, while the signified aspect involves the interpretation of the cultural and social meanings associated with these physical changes, which may encompass feelings of being undervalued, unproductive, and dependent (Thornton, 2002).

The impact of ageism on older people's self-perceptions, particularly in terms of loneliness, reductions in social interactions, and emotional problems has been progressively recognised (Segel-Karpas, Cohn-Schwartz & Ayalon, 2022). Ageism has further perpetuated negative perceptions of aging among older adults, with society portraying them as less physically functional and more reliant on caregiving (Kornadt & Rothermund, 2012). Among the three main

cognitive signifiers of healthiness, relationships, and personal image, society's negative stereotypes of older adults are especially profound, particularly in the areas of relationships and initiative in social interactions (Mena & Sánchez, 2011). Additionally, much of the research focus has been on highlighting the negative symbols of aging, particularly how different cohorts perceive aging while neglecting the diverse experiences and agency of older adults.

The traditional Chinese family discourse system places older people at the centre of a family and in an unassailable position. The popularity of Internet technology has given rise to cultural feedback (Cao, 2021), posing challenges to the traditional family discourse system and subsequently leading to rapid changes in older individual's perceptions of aging. This study focuses on exploring how the symbols of aging perceived by middle-aged and older adults in Chinese society will be presented, as well as probing how the elderly interact with aging myths and balance attitudinal perceptions. The study aims to bridge the gap in research on the communication mechanisms of aging myths, particularly in rural regions of developing societies experiencing increasing aging populations.

The data for this study were collected through qualitative in-depth interviews with elderly residents residing in five elderly care stations located in Miyun District, Beijing. These elderly care stations have been providing boarding care services for a considerable time. The investigation took place from November 2023 to March 2024, encompassing a total of four semi-structured focus group interviews. China has maintained a dual urban-rural household registration system for a long time. Notably, Miyun District experiences a relatively low influx of elderly migrants (National Bureau of Statistics, 2020), which minimizes sample errors associated

with urban household migration and ensures the representativeness of the rural elderly population in our sample. The sample comprised 35 elderly individuals aged between 60 and 90, approximately adhering to a binomial distribution. Additionally, the distribution of gender and education level was balanced, thereby facilitating the rational design of the focus group structure.

(Sample Representativeness)

The facilitators steered the participants into discussions on specific topics encompassing "physical and psychological changes in aging and perceptions of the changes", "changes in relationships with family and friends and perceptions of the changes", and "current perceptions of one's social role".

To facilitate effective interviews while honoring participants' preferences, inquiries that might trigger discomfort, indignation, or evasion, particularly those pertaining to deceased acquaintances, were preemptively broached and managed based on participants' willingness to engage. Focus group composition was meticulously structured along demographic lines, encompassing both genders and representative age cohorts spanning 60-70, 70-80, and 80-90 years, contingent upon participants' consent. Consequently, four focus groups were convened, each comprising three to five participants, ensuring heterogeneity in gender and age representation.

In this study, we transcribed a comprehensive corpus exceeding 150,347 words. Subsequently, the textual data was sequentially subjected to text segmentation, stemming lexical reduction, and lexical annotation based on the Nvivo14 platform. A stop word list was employed to exclude the common words from the category of consideration in the topic model. In the open

coding stage, two coders independently coded and obtained a total of 72 first-level codes. According to the principle of maximum likelihood, 31 initial categories were retained after eliminating those with a frequency below three occurrences. Influenced by Heider's Balance Theory, this paper found that the first-level codes initially conformed to the logical pattern of "other's existing attitudes (traditional stereotypes of aging) - individual's symbolic identity - individual's changing attitudes" through comparison. -Individual's change of attitude". After further generalization, five main categories were obtained, namely "emotional attitude, stereotypes of aging, identity, social cognition, and changes in interpersonal relationships", and 27 secondary categories and their connotations were formed accordingly. Based on Selective Coding, the study developed a theoretical model of the mythological framework of aging along the lines of emotional attitudes toward aging. The model showed that respondents' affective attitudes toward aging were influenced by aging stereotypes and further constructed aging myths; the dual role of affective attitudes and aging myths fueled respondents' compulsion to accept perceptions of aging identity. Finally, after completing the convergence of cognitive perceptions of interpersonal and social perceptions to the myths inherent in aging, individual attitudinal perceptions were in harmony.

From the analysis of the interview results, it was found that the symbols of aging involve three dimensions, which correspond to the stereotypes of aging in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and social perceptions, respectively. In the self-perception dimension, "rigidity of thought" and "decline in physical function" were regarded as common and correct perceptions. They believed that rigidity of thought and memory loss were inevitable and that the effects of

physical decline in older adults could be seen in all aspects of life, such as eating, sleeping, and other basic human activities. In the interpersonal dimension, "loneliness" emerged as the overriding perception, manifesting in an "unbridgeable generation gap" and "reduced needs" in relationships with children and "emotional detachment" in relationships with friends. This is reflected in the "difficult generation gap" and "reduced needs" in relationships with children and "emotional detachment" in relationships with friends. In the dimension of social perception, the perception of the elderly is centred on "disliked" and "ignored". Most of the reasons for being "disliked" come from the sub cognitions of "old-fashioned", "childish" and "useless", while the reasons for being "disliked" come from the sub cognitions of "old-fashioned", "childish" and "useless". While the perception of "disregarded" is a reflection of the gradual fading of the elderly from the centre of society to the margins of society, the two together interact with the changing social identity of the elderly. For instance, older individuals are frequently jested about their "childlike" nature, suggesting a regression to childhood, thus reflecting a decline in their adult status.

Upon entering a specific age stratum, aging, acting as a symbol, assumes a potent emblematic role, exerting influence on an individual's social cognition, identity construction, and interpersonal dynamics. Therefore, aging will reshape the relationship between the individual and society. According to Hyde's theory of equilibrium, individuals who progressively embrace the symbols of aging exist in two distinct states, equilibrium and disequilibrium. Equilibrium occurs when their prevailing attitudes align with the imperatives of aging symbols, fostering epistemic consonance throughout the aging process. In contrast, disequilibrium arises when such

congruence is absent. Within the coding results, three paths of equilibrium transformation were identified within the overarching framework encompassing attitude formulation, symbolic interaction, and attitudinal modification.

Path 1: Initial attitudes influenced by prevailing stereotypes foster resistance to aging symbols, leading to opposition towards their construction. However, societal interventions, such as provisions for old-age welfare and mandatory retirement policies, necessitate a recalibration of cognitive identity, thereby exerting significant impacts on interpersonal dynamics and social cognition. Path 2: The concurrent formation of initial attitudes along with a relatively objective understanding of aging culminate in the genesis of attitudes. Path 3: Initial resistance to aging symbols ultimately leads to a steadfast rejection of their construction, precluding adjustments to interpersonal relations.

This study aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of the framework of elderly reports influenced by traditional Chinese media, refine the initial attitude formation process towards elderly individuals, and present fundamental conclusions regarding the paths of attitude transformation for this paper.

References

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