The Dimensions of Successful Ageing in Iran:
"Structure" and "Agency"

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Abstract

Successful ageing is a flexible concept that takes on different meanings depending upon cultural context. Hence, the aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of multidimensional successful ageing among Iranian elderly. The data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. The stratified purposeful sampling technique was adopted to select respondents for interview. A sample of 60 persons aged 60 years and older were interviewed face-to face in Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Collected data were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software based on the pre-categories. Directed Content Analysis was employed to data analysis.

The findings were presented in 16 sub-categories and six main categories. The main categories were including; social well-being, psychological well-being, physical health, spirituality and transcendence, economic security, and environment and social context. The most prevalent dimension was social well-being and the most prevalent sub-category was positive characteristics. The results indicated successful ageing is not only a single-dimensional concept but also consists of verity of contextual themes. The definition and meaning of SA starts with an underlying individual dimension such as individual capacity and continues to a higher level such as structural and environmental dimensions.

In conclusion, this study indicated that the key determinant of achieving successful ageing is a positive and dynamic interaction of individual, family and environment levels of successful ageing.

Keywords: Successful ageing, Directed content analysis, Agency, Structure, Iran.

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Introduction

In Iran, according to the 2011 census, the number of people aged 60 and older is 6.2 million which represents 8.2 percent of the Iranian population. The ageing population is increasing and is estimated to be 25 percent of the Iranian population in 2050 (Sadeghi, 2013). Population ageing has a profound impact on a broad range of economic, political and social systems. Challenging consequences of ageing emerge on both social and individual levels. Despite the large amount of literature, the definition of the successful ageing concept is still unclear (lee, Lan & Yen, 2011, Depp and Jest, 2006; Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson & Cartwright, 2010; Bowling, 2007). Successful ageing is a flexible concept that takes on different meanings depending upon cultural context. Hence, the aim of this study was to investigate the perceptions of multidimensional successful ageing among Iranian elderly.

Data and methods

The data was collected primarily through semi-structured interviews. We used a stratified purposeful sample based on neighbourhood socio-economic situation of Tehran, the capital city of Iran. Based on their socio- economic situation where the subjects resided, the districts were categorized into five categories of high, middle to high, middle, middle to low, and low socio-economic situation. In each category, two districts were randomly selected and then six participants were interviewed in each district, three men and three women. In total, we interviewed with 60 older adults face-to face.

 Collected data were transcribed and analyzed using MAXQDA software based on the pre-categories. Directed Content Analysis and Inter-respondent Matrix was employed to analyse the qualitative data. Directed approach is guided by a more structured process than in a conventional approach. Using existing theory or prior research (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). In directed or deductive content analysis, for achieving trustworthiness in the preparation phases the validity of the categorization matrix is important. In the present study the categorization matrix was based on an integrative review method with systematic searching. The inter-respondent matrix identified which participants contributed to each emergent them. The emergent themes quantize for each participant to "1" and "0" if it contained a significant statement pertaining to the participant or otherwise (Onwuegbuzie and Teddli, 2003). Using the inter-respondent matrix the effect size was computed.

Findings

The findings were presented in 16 sub-categories and six main categories. The main categories were including; social well-being, psychological well-being, physical health, spirituality and transcendence, economic security, and environment and social context. The most prevalent dimension was social well-being and the most prevalent sub-category was positive characteristics (Table. 1)

Table.1 Percentage of participants in each dimensions and sub-category of successful ageing

Main categories	Sub-categories	Percent	
Social well-being	Social presence & interaction	76.6	81.3
	Social support	85.9	
Psychological well-being	Positive characteristics	92.2	65.3
	Lifespan satisfaction	78.1	
	Positive self-perception of ageing	56.3	
	Individual capabilities	56.3	
	Absence of mental illness	43.8	
Physical health	Functional health	50.0	64.1
	Avoidance of risk factors	79.7	
	Good Physical health	62.5	
Spirituality and transcend	Religiosity and beliefs	54.7	52.4
	Transcendent	50.0	
Financial security	Objective financial security	59.4	49.3
	Subjective financial security	39.1	
Environment and social context	Living in appropriate environment	31.3	27.4
	Absence of negative stereotype in society	23.4	

Majority of the participants mentioned successful ageing is related to engagement with society, being active, seeking new information in workshops and doing voluntary activities. These activities help the elderly to adapt with ageing deficiencies. In Iranian context Psychological well-being in terms of "Sense of being productive" especially for older Iranian females was to witness the successes of their children, such as high education, good job and high social prestige. Good Physical health well documented in literature.

The Results of study showed, Iranian older adults have a tolerance to having one or two diseases and don't see this as the blur of successful ageing. But the presence of different chronic diseases and several-times admission to the hospital will negatively impact on successful ageing. Regarding to the Iranian culture, participants indicated spirituality, religious beliefs and behaviours such as going to mosque, praying to God and being honest is important components in formation of successful ageing. Moreover, Iranian elderly illustrated "objective financial aspects" such as pension, savings, and home ownership and "subjective financial aspects" such as not having financial concerns and worries in affording medical and living costs in the future and also environment and social context in terms of avoidance of negative society labels such as "out of date" and exclusion from social roles and living in their favorite neighborhood, construct the concept of successful ageing.

Conclusion

Successful ageing is not only a single-dimensional concept which focuses only on physical aspects but also consists of verity of contextual themes. Moreover, the results showed successful ageing as a multilevel concept; the definition starts with an underlying individual dimension such as individual capacity and continues to a higher level such as structural and environmental dimensions (figure. 1).
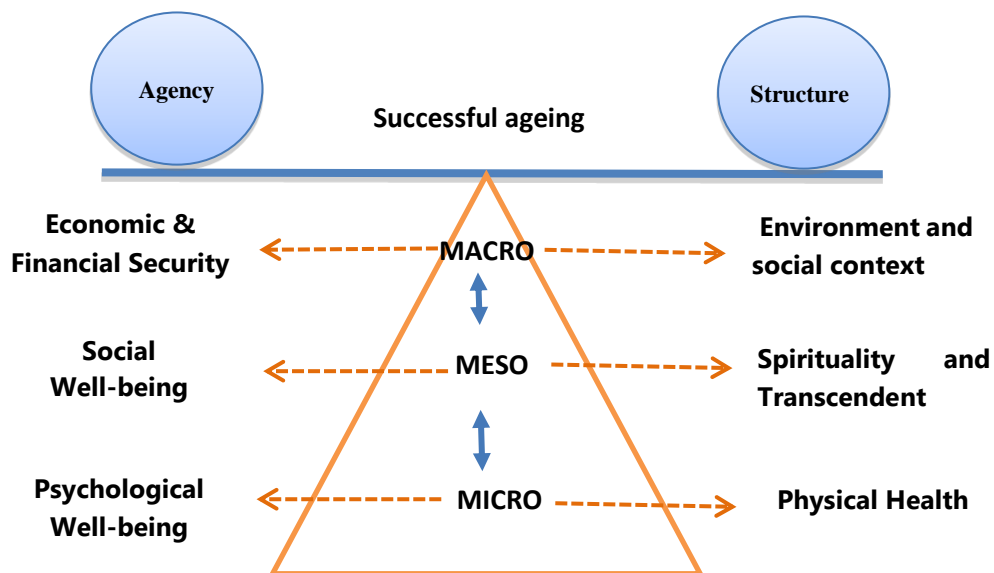

Figure 1- Balance in Successful ageing dimensions and levels

Thus, successful ageing is not a dichotomized concept to be denoted as (0) as non-successful and (1) as successful. It determines from micro to macro levels of non-successful and successful ageing. Therefor the interaction between all levels and making balance between Agency, capabilities to act independently with their own free choices, and structure, the factors and patterned arrangements that shape and limit an individual's opportunities (Barker, 2005), due to declining in later life is necessary more than the other stages of life.

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