

The meaning of life for an elderly man living alone: a narrative approach

Masako NAKAMURA¹⁾, Miwa YAMAMOTO¹⁾, Yuji KITAMURA²⁾, Yoko MURAKAMI¹⁾
Koko YAMADA²⁾, Shigeru SAKURABA¹⁾

1) Department of Nursing, Kyoto Koka Women's University, Kyoto, Japan

2) Meiji University of Integrative Medicine, Kyoto, Japan

Email: m-aota@mail.koka.ac.jp

Received ; July 20th, 2013; accepted August 15th 2013

ABSTRACT

Aim: To improve nursing care for the elderly in order to allow them to live independently. This study has used the narrative of an elderly man to learn about what has given his life meaning.

Method: Fifteen key concepts were extracted from interviews using the narrative approach.

Results and Conclusions: Mr. A, now near the end of his life, has found meaning in living his life, not only for himself, but also for those around him. The elderly support their own physical and mental health, and adjust to day-to-day life. Nursing care for the elderly should watch for and support these self-supporting efforts.

Keywords: Narrative approach, elderly man living alone

1. Introduction

The population of elderly Japanese is estimated to reach 35 million people in 2025.[1] The ability to live every day with purpose and to maintain their health is important for their quality of life (QOL). The elderly usually experience a decline in physical functions due to aging while retaining their cognitive functions and strong senses of individuality. Nursing care for the elderly can include assistance that supports their individual goals in addition to providing good health maintenance.

The values of the elderly are influenced by life experiences and perspectives. Nursing assistance that can fully grasp their life histories can be translated into care that increases each person's QOL.[2]

Kamiya wrote about the concept of "ikigai," which means the finding of a life worth living.[3]

Okamoto also investigated the factors related to the meaningful lives of the elderly, and the degree of autonomy including:

1. the characteristics of having a meaningful life for the elderly
2. the influences of having some social activity.
3. the influence of physical exercise, especially

those who do a lot of walking

4. those who subjectively believe they are in excellent health [4]

The word narrative means "the telling of a story" according to the Random House Eiwadai Dictionary. In this study, "I" is intended to mean the subject talking about the life of an elderly person, the subject of this report. [5]

The effect of using the narrative approach for the elderly has been mentioned in preceding studies. This paper has used the narrative approach in order to obtain suggestions to help in nursing practices related to the care of the elderly. [6] [7]

2. Objective

The purpose of this study was the identification of how to improve care for the elderly through the narrative approach.

3. Methods

The narrative approach was used to describe the experiences of Mr. A, an elderly man. Mr. A freely related his life story through interviews.

Interview preparation

- 1) Explanation of ethical considerations (see below).
- 2) Preparation of a comfortable environment for the interview.
- 3) Preparations to facilitate Mr. A speaking for long periods of time.

The creation of an interview guide

Mr. A completed two 60 minute pre-study interviews. The contents of these interviews were the basis for the creation of a 12-item interview guide.

Interview guide contents

- 1) Mr. A's memories from birth to army enlistment.
- 2) Mr. A's memories from enlistment to the end of the war.
- 3) Mr. A's memories from the end of the war to when he began local newspaper work
- 4) Mr. A's memories as a newspaper reporter at the local newspaper office.
- 5) Mr. A's marriage and memories of his child's birth.
- 6) Mr. A's memories of starting his business and becoming a member of the town assembly.
- 7) Mr. A's memories of his wife's death and his child becoming independent.
- 8) Mr. A's feelings about the birth of his grandchild and great-grandchildren.
- 9) Mr. A's hobby and his feelings about it.
- 10) Mr. A's feelings about his future and the future in general.
- 11) Thoughts Mr. A wants to pass on to the next generation.
- 12) Mr. A's feelings about the interview.

Interview method

Three interviews with Mr. A were conducted in a room of Mr. A's house, and lasted a total of approximately three hours and 30 minutes. Mr. A's interviews were recorded using an IC recorder, with his permission. Field notes were taken in addition to the recording.

Analysis method

The contents of the recordings and field notes were arranged, and two or more language

researchers selected the key concepts. Quotations and interpretations of Mr. A's life story were added focusing on the key concepts.

4. Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Meiji University of Integrative Medicine Ethics Committee. We explained to Mr. A that participation was completely voluntary, and that data would be stored in a safe that requires a key and would be destroyed after completion of the study. The study was initiated after obtaining written consent from Mr. A.

5. Results

Mr. A's narrative is shown in chronological order (Table 1). Fifteen key concepts were extracted from the contents.

- 1) He was sensitive to the current of the times during adolescence.
- 2) Due to food shortage, he enlisted to help his family.
- 3) His life was saved from the atomic bombing.
- 4) His way of life changed after the war.
- 5) Harnessing his experiences (communication techniques, electrical knowledge, etc.).
- 6) Lived his life thinking, "I can do anything while I'm young."
- 7) He became ill and experienced frustration.
- 8) He became respected as a newspaper reporter and found fulfillment through his work.
- 9) Related business was all completed in one day.
- 10) Society acknowledged his contributions.
- 11) Work ethic took priority over beliefs.
- 12) He contributed to society through his work.
- 13) His motivation for work decreased.
- 14) He returned to bachelorhood and reflected on his younger days.
- 15) His grandchild and great grandchildren now give his life meaning.

6. Discussion

In a little more than 80 years, Mr. A experienced a war (World War II) and other various occurrences. He responded flexibly to these, and they continue to influence his present life.

1. He was aware of and sensitive to the current of the times during his adolescence.

Mr. A observed his parents and the family business, and learned how to interact with people from childhood.

2. Due to the food shortage, he enlisted to help his family. Mr. A was born into a Christian home. Rather than being forced into the military, he enlisted to help his family. I consider this behavior reflects the underlying Christian belief that a life given by God should be lived for others as well.

3. His life was saved when duty took him away from Hiroshima during the atomic bombing..

4. His way of life changed after the war.
“I underwent a life conversion after the war. Taking advantage of the life I was given, I converted to a life of serving others. It was thanks to my life being miraculously protected by becoming a communications soldier. If I tried to use this life for others, and not only for myself, it was an opportunity to convert my beliefs of life.”

5. Harnessing his experiences (communication techniques, electrical knowledge, etc.).

6. Lived his life thinking, "I can do anything while I'm young." Mr. A believed in living actively, taking advantage of all the things he worked hard for.

7. He became ill and experienced frustration. Mr. A experienced an unexpected setback when he became ill, and had time to rest and think during his medical treatment. Mr. A felt that work challenged people to do all they could do to succeed in life.

8. He became respected as a newspaper reporter and found fulfillment through his work. After his recovery, he was able to turn his hobby of photography into work as a newspaper reporter. He married young and things changed.

9. Related business was all completed the same day.

10. Society acknowledges his contributions. Mr. A worked in the family business and contributed to society in good faith. As a result, Mr. A's work was acknowledged by society, and benefitted both him and society.

11. Work ethic took priority over beliefs.

12. He contributed to society through his work.

13. His motivation for work decreased. Mr. A took a position of honor and status as a Board of Education member and town councilor, and continued to lead a life of good faith that has contributed to help others.

14. He returned to bachelorhood and reflected on his younger days.

15. His grandchild and great-grandchildren give his life meaning. Mr. A lives every day to the fullest. His purpose in life now is his grandson and great-grandchildren. The death of his wife was a great loss, but he has continued to live a meaningful life up to the present.

Okamoto investigated factors related to a meaningful life in elderly people with active lifestyles, and found that a lifestyle including social activity, exercise, and walking was correlated with a highly meaningful life. In addition, such people often reported a higher subjective health status. [2]

Mr. A is active daily and continues to run the family business, participate in social activities (e.g., acting as the secretary of commerce and industry meetings and attending class reunions), engage in service activities (e.g., at church), drive his car, ride his bike, and travel. In addition, Mr. A acknowledged his environment, and reported a substantially higher subjective health status without any major illness. I considered "health and energy" to also be applicable [8] to Mr. A's

case, showing a notable relationship between having good health and a meaningful life as an elderly person.

Mr. A, now near the end of his life, reflected and found meaning in living a life not only for himself, but also for those around him.

7. Conclusion

In considering Mr. A's case, I considered the meaning of life from the perspective of the elderly, who adjust themselves to find an appropriate balance to facilitate day-to-day life. To support the mental and physical health of the elderly, nursing care should watch for and help their self-supporting efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks all participants in this study. We pray for the repose of Mr. A.

REFERENCES

1. White paper on aging society Cabinet Office (2010) www8.cao.go.jp/kourei/whitepaper/index-w.html.
2. Haruji Hirose, et al, A study of meaning of life for the elderly living alone. Yamaguchi Prefectural academic Information, 2009, No. 2, 26-31
3. Hideaki Okamoto - From survey of Osaka City Area A resident elderly factors related to meaningful life Elderly. Wayojoshidaigaku Bulletin of home economics system reviews, 2008, 48, 111-125
4. Mieko Kamiya, About the reason for living: Misuzu Shobo, 2004, Tokyo
5. Shogakukan Random House Dictionary Eiwadai Editorial Board Shogakukan Random House Dictionary Eiwadai. Shogakukan, 1979, Tokyo
6. Life Story script of the elderly in Canada using a narrative approach: Mineko Yamashita. Science of nursing practice, 2010, 35 (8), 84-88
7. To the world of care narrative approach as a story: Yuji Noguchi. Igaku, 2002, Tokyo

8. Baba Tetsuo, Health, leisure activities of the elderly, research on the reason for living(II) – from interviews in Kitakyushu, 2007

Table 1

<i>The meaning of life for an elderly man living alone: a narrative approach</i>				
Year	Age	Life history	The situation in Japan	Key concept
1927	0	<p>Birth.</p> <p>He was the eldest son born to a family that ran a dry-goods store.</p> <p>It was a Christian home, introduced by a grandfather.</p> <p>He had two younger sisters.</p>	<p>Financial crisis (1927)</p> <p>Showa Depression (1930)</p> <p>Manchurian Incident (1931)</p> <p>February 26th Incident (1936)</p> <p>Sino-Japanese War (1937)</p>	
1940	13	<p>He entered an old-system junior high school.</p>	<p>National Mobilization Act (1938)</p>	
1943	16	<p>He served by contributing physical labor.</p> <p>He participated in the manufacture of an attack plane "Tienshan" aboard a war vessel in Handa-shi, Aichi.</p> <p>Studying was impossible.</p> <p>Pressure to join the army was felt in the atmosphere in school and in the outside world.</p> <p>He considered himself unsuitable for the front lines since he was short in stature.</p> <p>He liked physics and mathematics. This time he recalls as the start of the time that "he liked machines "</p>	<p>Pacific War (1941)</p>	<p>1. He was aware and sensitive to the currents of the times during his adolescence.</p>
1944	17	<p>At 17, he saw signs that the war situation was worsening.</p> <p>It seemed that food was getting scarce every day, and there was nothing to eat even if he wanted to eat. To conserve the family's food, he quit junior high school (old system) and became an army child soldier.</p> <p>He trained with suicide attack units and became a communications soldier after that.</p> <p>He trained for several months as a communication soldier, shouldered a walkie-talkie, had two subordinates, and</p>	<p>Midway naval battle (1942)</p> <p>Mainland bombing gets more frequent and heavier (1944)</p>	<p>2. Due to the food shortages, he enlisted in the army to help support his family.</p>

The meaning of life for an elderly man living alone: a narrative approach

		<p>was assigned the duty of sending coded messages by telegraphic communications.</p> <p>He did not work at the frontlines but took a military affairs post in Japan.</p> <p>He recollects the reason as: "my body was too short and this what saved me from being sent to the front lines."</p>		
1945	18	<p>Secretly receiving a U.S. anti-Japanese broadcast, Japan thinks that it has lost the war.</p> <p>Although he was living in barracks in Hiroshima Prefecture until the end of June, he was reassigned to another area and was not affected by the dropping of the Hiroshima atomic bomb in August.</p> <p>He thinks, "God's protection saved me." So, immediately after the end of the war, he was baptized and became a Christian. "I came to think I would be allowed to do anything" in my given life.</p> <p>After demobilization, he took advantage of the knowledge he had gained in the army to make food with an impromptu electric bread baking machine, make radios, etc., to sell a make a living.</p>	<p>Atomic bomb (1945)</p> <p>Potsdam Declaration, accepting surrender (1945)</p> <p>Creation of the Japanese Constitution (1946)</p>	3. His life is saved from the Hiroshima atomic bomb.
				4. His way of life changed after the war.
				5. Harnessed his experiences (communication techniques, electrical knowledge, etc.) and applied to his new life.
1949	22	<p>He heard about the camera which was being imported from Germany, and as a hobby, purchased one for about 40,000 yen. "Since I had a camera, I was advised I should become a journalist for a newspaper publishing company." ["the camera was very expensive at that time"]</p>	<p>Prosperity during the Korean War (1950)</p>	6. Lived his life thinking, "I can do anything while I'm young."
1950	22— 26	<p>He became very active with church affairs.</p> <p>The world became more peaceful and the margin came out also in people's lives.</p> <p>He worked at a local newspaper office. He studied electrical engineering at a university while working.</p> <p>However, he had to leave school due to illness (tuberculosis). He wanted to find work, but returned home to rest.</p>	<p>Peace Treaty signed in San Francisco (1951)</p>	7. He became ill and experienced frustration.

The meaning of life for an elderly man living alone: a narrative approach

1953	26	<p>He regained his health and covered the flood damage of a local town as a newspaper reporter. He became a part-time employee of a newspaper publishing company, efficiently employed his army experience, and was commended for his precise coverage.</p> <p>He covered many incidents as a journalist and a cameraman, remembering once that "that photograph was taken while I was chest deep in water." Because "I had sold newspapers as a child in our store, and later developed good skills as a reporter and photographer, I was also asked by the police to work for them." Moreover, he pursued a part time side business.</p>		8. He became respected as a newspaper reporter and found fulfillment through his work.
1953	26	<p>He got married by arrangement through an acquaintance. "She was a beauty." With my wife, I started a delivery business and also continued as a part-time newspaper reporter. "The marriage ceremony was held at the church," and "my wife helped with the business and was able to improve it." The business they choose was the delivery of goods with the customer required to pay in cash on the spot.</p>		9. All related business sales can be completed on the same day.
1955	28	A daughter was born.		10. Society acknowledges his contributions.
1958	31	A son was born.		
1960	33	<p>Business prospers.</p> <p>He was awarded a prize for excellent work from the Tax Payment Association. "My wife strove for selling high quality goods." He "wrote in a journal every day," recollecting his thoughts.</p>	<p>Tokyo Olympic Games (1964)</p> <p>Campus dispute intensification (1969)</p> <p>Expo (1970)</p>	
1970	43	<p>Due to a recommendation from the taxation office, he served as the commerce-and-industry chairman for four years. "I somewhat neglected my beliefs."</p>	First oil crisis (1973)	11. Work ethic took priority over beliefs.

The meaning of life for an elderly man living alone: a narrative approach

1973	46	<p>He became a member of the Board of Education, and worked for eight years.</p> <p>"Although it was cheap remuneration, I did my best for the public."</p>		12. He contributed to society through his work.
1980	53	<p>His father passed " passed away in my arms," and his mother soon after that.</p> <p>The first grandchild, was born.</p>	<p>Bubble economy (1987)</p> <p>Consumption tax enforcement (1989)</p>	13. His motivation for work decreased.
1998	71	<p>"I have lost my wife." He regrets that acting as a member of the town assembly may have increased his wife's fatigue.</p> <p>At present, he has been single for 13 years. He reflected on his military experience, his participation in initiating commerce-and-industry meetings, attending class reunions, being a member of the town assembly, and acting as the manager of the meetings. He then decided to travel. He also talked about the economy, and says that even now "I can continue to live everyday thanks to the income from my pension and business concerns."</p>	<p>Collapse of the bubble economy (1991)</p> <p>Sarin nerve-gas attack on the Tokyo subway system (1995)</p> <p>Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (1995)</p>	14. He returned to bachelorhood and reflected on his younger days.
2011	84	<p>He now has three great-grandchildren. The great-grandchildren live nearby and he goes to see them by bicycle.</p> <p>One grandchild is studying at the University of Tokyo and is an excellent student.</p> <p>Mr. A's mental state is shaped by his life experiences. Good or bad, things may change at any time in an ordinary life.</p>		15. His grandchild and great-grandchildren give his life meaning.