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## **Successful Aging and Self Perceptions**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is the first of a series of studies conducted on an aging population from the state of Maharashtra, perhaps a first of its kind Indian community based study on successful aging. 448 participants are studied with a view to understand their self perceptions and findings from 410 respondents are presented. To assess the respondents' perceptions of how others see them, survey questions asked about their perceived age and also for adjectives best describing them.

Finally, the respondents were also asked to indicate self-ratings of satisfaction across different periods in their life span. Interesting trends in the findings are presented along with descriptive data about the demographic distribution of the sample, and a Chi square analysis of self rating of overall life satisfaction scores across five categories of life satisfaction.

### **Introduction**

Success at cognitive aging among the elderly is rapidly gaining importance as the percentage of greying population increases as a result of longevity due to better healthcare. This paper is part of a larger study launched by the Institute of Psychological Health, Thane and led by one of the authors (ST), and focuses on the role of Self perceptions in the elderly. Variables considered in this paper include some demographic data as well as self and other- perceptions of age, fears about aging and satisfaction among the elderly. Some gender differences and trends in frequencies of the above endorsements are explored.

In current years, as psychology moves towards positive realms of health and well being, a branch of neuropsychology called positive neuropsychology is being explored. (Randolph, 2013)

### **Review of Literature**

Aging is the process of growing older, or a phase where stressors are no longer effectively counterbalanced by the protective functions of the body. A lot of the studies on successful cognitive aging focus on brain functions alone, examine neuroprotective factors and deal with the interesting notion of cognitive reserves (Stern, 2006). Other investigations look at overall life satisfaction and quality of life in a more holistic manner (DeLuca, 2011). Still others actively search for factors which may lead to better cognitive performance in later life (Potter et al, 2008).

Neuroscientists continue to be puzzled by mismatches between clinical and imaging findings which seem to point to other factors which hold up neurocognition (Snowdon, 1996).

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But in this plethora of findings, how do cohorts of aging people perceive themselves? Do they see themselves as younger or older than they actually are? Are they satisfied with their own state of cognition? Are there any age trends in life satisfaction and gender differences in self perception? All these are areas explored by the present paper, which is the first of a series of documents being prepared by IPH on its 'SAGE study'.

## **Methodology**

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Participants recruited were elderly aged 60 and above from Mumbai, Thane, Pune, Nashik, Ratnagiri and surrounding district and rural areas in Maharashtra. Written informed consent was taken from the participants. Data was collected using a survey administered to the participants by trained volunteers. The survey consisted of specific questions about a number of variables, as well as psychometric instruments. For the purpose of the current paper, data for some variables has been analysed. Overall, 448 participants were surveyed. Data for 38 participants was discarded because of incomplete forms or errors in the forms, and data for 410 participants was analysed.

To understand participants' self-perceptions of their own age and their own assessment of how old others perceive them to be, they were asked to fill in the blanks for the following sentences- "You perceive yourself to be \_\_\_\_ years old" and "Others perceive you as being \_\_\_\_ years old." The score was based on the difference between their actual chronological age and the age they mentioned in the blanks, and responses were divided into 5 categories- 10 to 5 years younger than actual age, 4 years younger to actual age, 1 to 5 years older, 6 to 10 years older, and more than 10 years older. Chi squares were used to find out the significance of the frequencies.

To further understand their perceptions about how others see them, they were given a list of adjectives- 4 with a positive connotation- contented, relaxed, imaginative, enthusiastic, and 6 with a negative connotation- worried, listless, dissatisfied, lazy, sad, hopeless. They were asked to rate to what extent they believed their family members would use each of these adjectives to describe them on a 4-point Likert scale from 0 suggesting never to 5 suggesting always. The totals of the positive adjective scores and the negative adjective scores were calculated.

To measure self-ratings of satisfaction across different periods in your life span, participants were asked to mark their own rating from 0 to 10 with 0 suggesting extreme dissatisfaction and 10 suggesting complete satisfaction, for the age groups of till 12 years, 13 to 19 years, 20 to 45 years, 46 to 60 years, and after 60 years. Means of the same were calculated.

To measure self-ratings of overall life satisfaction, participants were asked to rate themselves on an analogue from 0 meaning complete dissatisfaction to 100 meaning complete satisfaction. Responses were coded into 5 categories- between 0 to 20, between 21 to 40, between 41 to 60, between 61 to 80, and between 81 to 100.

## Results

Out of the 410 participants, 253 (61%) were females and 157 (39%) were males. Their ages ranged from 61 to 95 years, and their mean age was 77 years. 301 (73%) were married, 17 (4%) were unmarried and 92 (23%) were widowed. 135 participants (33%) and 134 participants (33%) were from Thane and Pune respectively, while 67 (17%) were from Mumbai, 17 (4%) were from Nashik, 11 (3%) were from Ratnagiri, and the other 46 (11%) were from other districts and villages in Maharashtra. 371 participants (90%) hailed from urban areas, 24 (6%) from semi-urban, and 15 (4%) from rural areas.

With respect to *how old the participants perceived themselves to be and how old the participants felt that others perceived them to be*, numbers and frequencies for each of the 5 categories are given in Table 1. Frequencies of responses across the 5 categories for self-assessments and assessments of others' perceptions were each compared using Chi Squares, and values were found to be as follows- For self-assessments,  $\chi^2(4, N = 410) = 587, p < 0.005$ , and for self-ratings of others' perceptions,  $\chi^2(4, N = 410) = 775, p < 0.005$ . Significantly more participants than expected felt younger than they actually were, and also believed that others thought they were younger than they actually were.

**Table 1: Self assessment and beliefs about others' assessment of their age-frequencies of responses across 5 categories:**

| Own perception of their age   | No. of participants | Percentage | Beliefs about others' assessments of their age | No. of participants | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|------------|--|---------------------|------------|
| 10 to 5 years younger         | 238                 | 58%        | 10 to 5 years younger                          | 292                 | 71%        |
| 4 years younger to actual age | 158                 | 39%        | 4 years younger to actual age                  | 109                 | 27%        |
| 1 to 5 years older            | 10                  | 2%         | 1 to 5 years older                             | 5                   | 1%         |
| 6 to 10 years older           | 3                   | 0.73%      | 6 to 10 years older                            | 4                   | 1 %        |

|                          |   |       |                          |   |     |
|--------------------------|---|-------|--------------------------|---|-----|
| More than 10 years older | 1 | 0.27% | More than 10 years older | 0 | 0 % |
|--------------------------|---|-------|--------------------------|---|-----|

The mean score for *positive adjectives* was 12.17, much higher than the mean score for *negative adjectives* which was 2.7, indicating that participants reported that others perceived them in terms of positive attributes much more than negative ones.

With respect to *retrospective satisfaction ratings across the different periods in their life span*, mean satisfaction scores in childhood (till 12 years) was 8.34, mean score in adolescence (between 13 and 19 years) was 8.31, in early adulthood (between 20 and 45 years) was 7.90, in middle adulthood (between 46 and 60) was 8.11, and late adulthood (after 60 years) is 8.24. Satisfaction across the different periods in the life span was almost similarly high.

With respect to *overall life satisfaction scores*, frequencies of responses across the 5 categories were compared using Chi Square, and the value was-  $\chi^2(4, N = 410) = 438, p < 0.005$ . Actual frequencies are given in Table 2. Significantly more individuals than expected rated themselves as being highly to very highly satisfied.

**Table 2: Life Satisfaction analogue scores- frequencies across 5 response categories:**

| Life Satisfaction score categories | Number of participants | Percentage of responses |
|------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 0 to 20 (dissatisfaction)          | 0                      | 0 %                     |
| 21 to 40 (low satisfaction)        | 4                      | 1 %                     |
| 41 to 60 (medium satisfaction)     | 46                     | 12 %                    |
| 61 to 80 (high satisfaction)       | 144                    | 35 %                    |
| 81 to 100 (very high satisfaction) | 216                    | 52 %                    |

## Discussion

Perhaps the most interesting finding of the study is the statistically significant frequency with which high overall life satisfaction ratings were endorsed by the aging participants of the study, whose ages ranged from 61 to 95.

It is also important to note that participants saw themselves as appearing younger than they actually were with significantly frequency, and also thought others thought they were younger than they actually were. Specifically, 58% felt 5 to 10 years younger than they actually were, and an even higher number, ie 71% thought others saw them as 5 to 10 years younger than they actually were.

Positive adjectives were used by these participants to describe themselves, to a markedly higher degree than use of negative adjectives to describe themselves.

Finally, with regard to retrospective satisfaction ratings across the different periods in their life span, it was interesting to note that contrary to a general belief that one would feel markedly differentially satisfied with one's life at different life stages, the respondents seemed to rate different life stages much the same, and all of them reasonably positively. Where 10 was the maximum possible score, ratings largely hovered between 8 and 9.

Finally, it is interesting to note the demographics of the group, vis a vis gender distribution, geographical representation, and marital status. The mean age was 77 years, an old old age range.

## Conclusion

As one of the few community based surveys conducted on the old and the old old in India and specifically in Maharashtra, the findings of this study throw an interesting light on an emerging new area in psychology which may be dubbed Positive neuropsychology. More studies are in the process of completion and will be reported by the IPH SAGE Study group in rapid succession in this and other publications. In India, we have a rich heritage of satisfied aging, Vanaprastha and positive choices made by the elderly at different progressing life stages. This study seems to fit into this framework.

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