The meaning of "getting together" to older-elderly women in a mountainous community

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The meaning of "getting together" to older-elderly women in a mountainous community

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to clarify what it means to older-elderly women from a mountainous community to "get together" with people in their community. Applying the grounded theory approach, data was collected and analyzed from conducting semi-structured interviews with 17 subjects resident in District A of H City that had participated in a club for the older-elderly, which had already been disbanded. The interviews were recorded on tape, and at the same time written notes were made of important points. Information on the expressions and gestures of the subjects, the interview venue and other salient points were recorded as field notes. The authors participated and observed every salon session.

It was evident that the older-elderly women selected the venues at which they got together based on shared values and situations and the level of perception concerning their health. We found five categories on the meaning of getting together. They are being able to recognize the existence of mutually supportive peers based on shared values and situations, being able to feel empathy and a shared perception concerning health, being able to savor a sense of liberation as a consequence of living in an isolated, mountainous farming community and sharing unfettered space, being able to share a sense of achievement, and the reflection of their own will through the leaders. This last category related to venues for voluntary get-togethers and provided an impetus for getting together at these venues. A core category of holding onto their individualities and being themselves was extracted from the getting together of these older-elderly women. In order to hold onto their individualities and be themselves, the elderly themselves needed to recognize the existence of mutually supportive peers based on shared values and situations, peers with whom they had a shared perception and empathy concerning health, and space. The elderly selected the venues for getting together in accordance with the level of their perceptions of their own health. In mountainous communities there is a need to create communities in which the elderly can select different styles of venues for getting together that include both public and private spaces and that are accessible to the older-elderly on foot.

Key words

mountainous community, older-elderly women, meaning of getting together, holding onto their individualities

Introduction

It is forecast that the elderly population will peak at 35.5 million in 2025. According to the 2003 National Livelihood Survey, the number of single-member households among elderly households is increasing by approximately 13.8% respectively every year. In particular, female single-member households comprise 77.3% of elderly single-member

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households, with many of these women in the older-elderly age group.

Existing day centers providing activities for the elderly called salons were restructured along with the introduction of the Long-Term Care Insurance System, which resulted in long-term care insurance funding for center-based day services and activity-oriented day services. It was at this time that the day service centers in the area covered by this research were established. Reforms to the Long-Term Care Insurance System implemented in 2005 placed particular emphasis on preventing long-term care. Meanwhile, mergers by city, town and village authorities resulted in the loss of inefficient services and services whose effectiveness was not easily measured. The disbanding of the older-elderly salon attended by participants in this study was one consequence of such moves. This had the effect of making it difficult for many older-elderly to utilize long-term care insurance and also diminished options for gathering at conveniently located venues.

Previous research related to the use by the elderly of clubs called "salons," day services and other long-term care prevention services verifies that they have the effect of improving the cognitive functions, quality of life, daily living activities, and physical functions of participants[1-4].

In terms of the value of interaction with others by the elderly , the necessity for revitalizing inter-generational interaction[5], and the necessity for more public support for the older-elderly and community groups[6,7]. A correlation has been established between interaction with others outside the family and the mortality rate, depression, and level of satisfaction with life[8]. It has been reported that younger-elderly women themselves view interaction with others outside the family in their immediate communities as caring mutual behavior that is part of everyday interaction[9]. As for the significance of participation in day services, it is said to be mutually supportive, reduces uneasiness and anxiety, and is a new pleasure[10]. Furthermore, it allows the elderly in farming communities to continue to feel proud of their health[11]. As seen from the above, there is a considerable body of research on the effects and significance of participation in gatherings such as salons. However, there is little research on how the elderly themselves view interaction with others, nor has much attention been paid to the older-elderly age group.

We have previously noted the necessity for opportunities for the elderly in mountainous areas to gather at venues that are accessible on foot from the perspective of the geographical environment[12]. However, such places and opportunities have been diminishing. The aim of this research is to clarify what it means to older-elderly women to "get together" with people in their community and how they select venues for this activity. This should be of some assistance for community health activities for the elderly.

Johnson & Johnson define a group as consisting of two or more individuals that have face-to-face mutual interaction, are aware of mutual group membership and acknowledge the other members in the group. In their view, when making an effort to attain a mutual goal, the members of the group are mutually aware of the existence of a positive mutually-dependent relationship[13]. Shaw regards a group as a collection of individuals that have an influence on each other[14]. Drawing from these definitions, for the purpose of the research described here "getting together" is defined not merely as the act of assembling, but also incorporates the meaning of a group whereby it is defined as "individuals going voluntarily to a defined place with the expectation of interaction with a number of other individuals."

Research Method

1. Research design

In order to establish the meaning of getting together to the elderly themselves by listening to the personal opinions of the elderly in the community, it is necessary not to simply collect data through interviews and observing participation, but to also explore the relationships between concepts and reach inductive validation. Accordingly, we have adopted Strauss and Corbin's method of grounded theory[15].

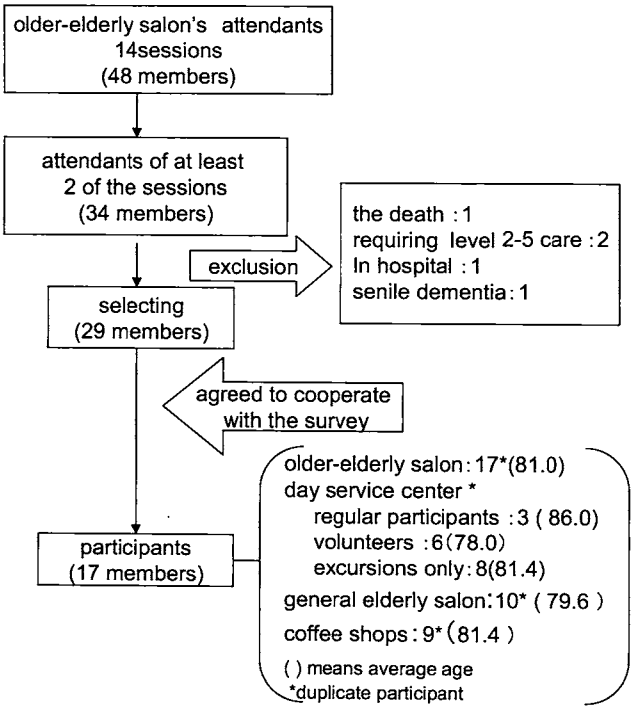

Fig.1 method of selecting participants

2. Method of selecting participants

Participants were selected from a salon in District A of H City (formerly S Town), Gifu Prefecture established with the aim of preventing older-elderly from becoming housebound. The salon was disbanded in January 2004. Figure 1 shows the method of selecting participants. All subjects were women, had an average age of 81 years (ranging from 71-92 years) and had attended the salon an average of 8.7 times. Four lived independently, and with the exception of one woman who had a degree of self-reliance and whose disability was classified as J_1 (almost independent in daily life and capable of going out alone), all participants were self-sufficient in daily living activities.

Outline of subject community

The area formerly known as S Town is located in the northwestern part of Gifu Prefecture and in 2004 was merged into H City along with six other towns. In winter snow reaches a depth of around two meters. Houses are scattered at the foot of a mountain. Since the houses are built on the mountain side of a main road, there are slopes and different levels between the front doors of the houses and the road. The population of S Town to which the subject community belongs is 12,716 persons and has 3,750 households. The elderly comprise 26.7% of the population and of the 714 elderly households 317, or 44.3%, are single-member elderly households. These figures are current as of June, 2006.

3. Data collection method

Data was collected between June 2005 and March 2006. We visited the subjects' homes to conduct interviews. The interviews were semi-structured interviews held using an interview guide. Subjects were asked "When you look back now on your participation in the "Yoramai-kai" (salon), what do you think about it?" and "Have you been participating in any other gatherings since then?" Thus, they were asked to talk freely about what it was like when they took part and what stayed in their minds, conversations with peers, what they felt at such times, and the behavior of their families. The interviews of subjects who gave their consent were recorded on tape and at the same time written notes were made of important points. Information on the expressions and gestures of the subjects, the interview venue and other salient points were recorded as field notes. The average interview length was around 50 minutes per individual, ranging in length from 30 minutes to one hour. The authors participated and observed every salon session.

4. Method of analysis

Verbatim records of the interviews were compiled immediately following the interviews using the field notes and tape recordings. Responses were divided into minimum comprehensible groups of sentences according to context, and the meanings of the behavior and thoughts of the elderly subjects that could be interpreted from the context were examined. In addition, because we had attended every salon session, the analysis also referred to records and photographs of those sessions. In the course of analyzing the responses of several subjects it became evident that their feelings and the way that they participated differed somewhat according to the venue. As a result, analysis was repeated, this time classifying

the responses according to venue. An open code was devised that separated responses into awareness of the venue and the feelings of the subjects before and after participating at those venues. A secondary code was devised from open codes for each venue and for each participant by interpreting what going to the respective venues meant to the elderly subjects and what the mode of participation and disbanding of the salon meant to each individual. Next, the secondary codes of all participants were classified by sorting similar codes into the same category, which were then coded and classified according to sub-categories. Categories and core categories were extracted by increasing the degree of abstraction. The commonalities and differences in the core categories extracted for each venue were reexamined from the perspective of lifestyle background, values, and community characteristics, and the core category extracted again after removing the divisions for each venue.

5. Ensuring validity and reliability

We examined validity and reliability using the work of Guba and Lincoln[16]. With regard to credibility, we had come in contact with the culture and views on life of the people in the district in the course of ongoing involvement with the elderly in the district for a period of around five years. During the process of data analysis the authors were supervised by a researcher experienced in qualitative research. Another researcher who is an expert in community nursing also took part. The coding and categorization was disclosed and a discussion meeting held. In addition, the opinions of the salon leaders and a physician in charge of the subject community were sought concerning the coded concepts and then examined. As for dependability, a check was made by a third party and the research methodology was clearly documented, field notes prepared, and the series of steps leading up to the conclusions were clarified as a means of demonstrating that the research process conformed to a generally accepted standard. With regard to conformability, raw data, analyzed data, the structure of the findings, the research process and the objective of the research were recorded in detail.

6. Ethical considerations

The purpose of the research was explained to the city employee in charge of the salons and to the session leaders, who were also responsible for introducing the author to the subjects. Written and verbal explanations were given to the subjects and the interviews held upon obtaining written consent. Matters explained to the subjects included permission for recording, refusal to respond to some questions, and that refusal to cooperate with the research would not place the subject at any disadvantage with regard to participation in salons or similar groups. Subjects were informed that the author had strict control over the data and that data would be destroyed following the completion of the research. Approval was received from the Medical Ethics Committee of the Research Graduate School of Medical Science Kanazawa University.

Research Findings

Analysis revealed that the older-elderly subjects were all aware of getting together at four venues: a day service center, a salon mainly for the older-elderly, a salon for the elderly in general, and coffee shops. The two salons are referred to as the "older-elderly salon" and "general elderly salon" respectively. When taking part in gatherings at coffee shops, participants received a breakfast consisting of bread, salad, egg and soup for the price of a cup of coffee. This complimentary service is common in the Gifu area.

As a result of analysis undertaken from the perspective of eliciting the meaning of getting together to the elderly subjects, 15 sub-categories and five categories were extracted. Once core category was also extracted.

1. Being able to recognize the existence of supportive peers based on shared values and situations

At the day service centers the subjects were with peers whom they knew, were of the same generation and were also frail, and so experienced a sense of *camaraderie as the physically and socially weak*. At the older-elderly salon, due to

personal relationships developed by living for many years in a small isolated community in the mountains, the subjects sensed *the existence of peers who, having also lived through and since the war, supported and empathized with their own hard lives.* The general elderly salon had been formed five years earlier. Consequently, it was a group in which personal relationships had been formed with virtually no change in the salon membership, and whose members had their advancing years in common. Accordingly, at this salon they sensed *the existence of healthy peers who were facing old age together.* At the coffee shops, they felt a strong sense of connectedness from eating a meal together and a shared sense of loneliness as a result of getting older, they sensed *the existence of peers with whom they shared their present feelings as they aged, whose participation was not determined by age.*

2. Experiencing and empathizing with a shared perception concerning health

At the day service centers, the subjects accepted the elderly who were more frail than themselves while identifying with what they saw as their future selves, and so *accepted others and empathized by recognizing their own weaknesses.* At the older-elderly salons, as they spent time with the elderly of the same generation they saw themselves reflected in their peers. Their comments included "I was able to meet those who were truly old," and "I still wanted to get together with those still alive." Thus, "Through seeing healthy peers of the same age, I affirmed that I was healthy myself" and "By having the same sort of program as my peers I became confident and was aware of the good state of my health." From these we may *extrapolate that by engaging in similar behavior to their peers they affirmed their own health.* In the general elderly salons, there were times when "I had a genuine laugh and by using my body realized that I am healthy," whereby subjects *realized that they were currently healthy.* As for the coffee shops, it was by *going out to a coffee shop that they perceived that they were healthy and sensed the "now" in their lives.*

3. Savoring a sense of liberation and being able to share unfettered space as a consequence of living in an isolated farming village society

Subjects at the older-elderly salons and general elderly salons subjects felt an affinity with one another, as illustrated by the comment, "Because many of the people were of the same age, even if we talked about food or the past we immediately understood each other and were on the same wavelength, which is not the case with young people." Moreover, with some saying "Although I have a family there is little chance to talk so I talk to the cow while I'm tending to it," it is only by getting together that they can obtain the mutual relations with others they long for and feel "a sense of connectedness and togetherness by communicating while sharing the same time and space." As illustrated by the comment "I have engaged only in farming since my younger years and every day was spent next to my husband working hard." Now finally free in their older years, there was also the sense that "Since they are public places it's a valuable opportunity to be able to go out without having to feel constrained by my family or neighbors." From these we may extrapolate that by *sharing the same time and space and feeling unconstrained while enjoying mutual relationships with other people* the subjects felt *a sense of liberation from their daily lives achieved from being able to go out as they pleased.*

As for the coffee shops, one said, "Enjoying a decent way of life came only after years of looking after children and nursing others and is a reward for the hard times I've had." Others said, "Sometimes I can give spending money to my grandchildren" From these it is evident that getting together at a coffee shop is a *symbol of their spare time and money.* The subjects live in an isolated community in the mountains where they live their lives aware of what others think of them. It is in this situation that for them going to a coffee shop "Might cause others to finger point behind my back, members of the opposite sex are also there, and there is sense of liberation amid a

thrilling excitement." They also said, "I feel dressed up," "I feel a sense of liberation from my deceased husband," and "It's an unfettered space where I'm not constrained by my daughter-in-law or children." The subjects felt *a sense of liberation in an unfettered space.*

4. Being able to share a sense of achievement

At the day service center, the subjects felt that they derived *a sense of achievement and shared a sense of competency while receiving the same kind of assistance as their peers.* The subjects said of the older-elderly salon and the general elderly salon that they felt "Pleasure and a sense of fulfillment from being able to learn from those older than ourselves and the instructors." Consequently, the subjects *shared a sense of fulfillment, a sense of achievement and a sense of competency from learning new things.*

5. Own will reflected through the leaders

The leaders at the day service center were professionals. At the coffee shops, however, because a leader was not necessary the subjects did not reveal the existence of a leader at these two venues. At the older-elderly salon and general elderly salon the leaders were seen as "Ideal and the object of envy because I wanted to be youthful, lively and behave like them," and "Our spokespersons," Thus, *the existence of leaders who served as spokespersons and were idealized* provided an impetus for the venues where the subjects got together.

From the above, the women selected the venues for getting together on the basis of shared values and situations and in accordance with the level of their perceptions concerning health. Five categories were extracted for the meaning of getting together to the subjects. The core category extracted for older-elderly women getting together was "*Holding onto their individuality and being themselves.*"

Discussion

1. The meaning of getting together

The five extracted categories share the following background factors. First, it is through a strong sense of camaraderie from having come through the hard times experienced during the war and through getting older that these women share the same values and situations as they have become physically and socially weaker. Second, having been parted from those close to them through death they are aware of their diminishing physical health as they get older. Third, the characteristics of the community in which they live have created a feeling of isolation and of having been stymied. These characteristics include the geographical environment of being enclosed by mountains on four sides and a dramatic decline in contact with the outside due to the depth of snow in winter, having to do everything as part of a lifestyle based on mountain forests and farming, whereby getting married meant becoming valuable labor along with their husbands, the fact that in a farming environment the extent to which they worked played an important part in how the inhabitants regarded one another, which also strongly influenced the code of conduct of individuals[17], and the belief that the basic unit comprises one's immediate family[18]. Fourth, a decrease in experiences or opportunities leading to self-actualization of a sense of achievement or a sense of competency. Fifth, decreasing opportunities for recognition of their social existence. These women selected space and time to spend with their peers with whom they have an empathy based on their shared backgrounds, and try to hold onto their own individualities and be themselves as they perceive their own health status while projecting themselves onto their peers.

According to Okamoto's theory on identity during the latter half of one's life, one matures while re-integrating one's identity based on one's individual identity and relationships[19]. The significance of getting together is seen as an opportunity for promoting the re-integration of identity within relationships with others. Figure 2 shows the relationships between the categories extracted for the meaning of getting together to older-elderly women in a mountainous community and the venues where they got together.

The women selected the four venues according to their perceptions of the level of their own health. The citizen's center that provides the venue for

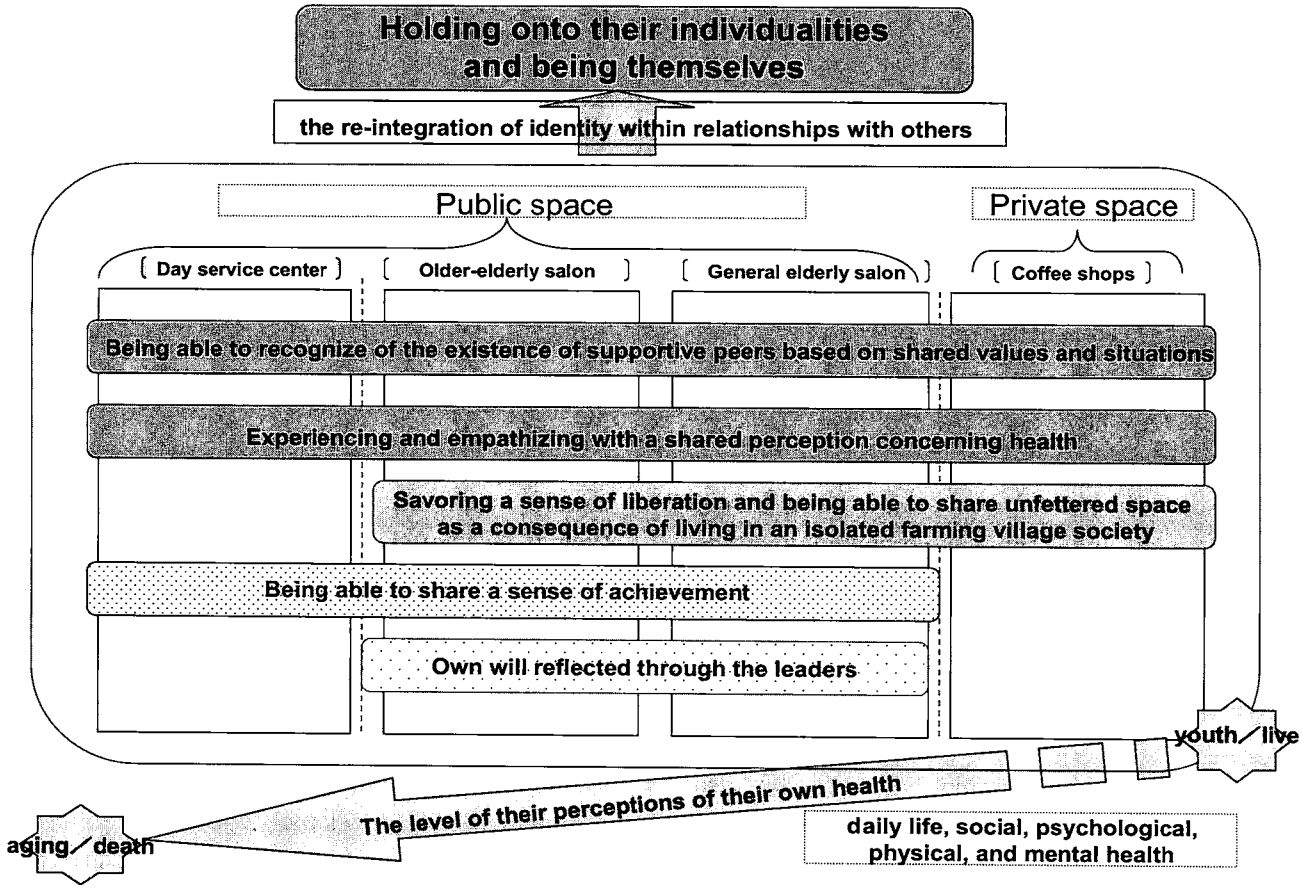

Fig.2 The relationship between the categories extracted for the meaning of getting together to old-elderly women in a mountainous community.

the older-elderly salon and the general elderly salon was used as a meeting place many years ago. Consequently, it has functioned as a village meeting place and had been an important site at which village decision-making took place[20]. Both the citizen's center and the day service center are public spaces, while the coffee shops are private spaces. From a community perspective where residents have a nodding acquaintance with others over a wide area that extends beyond their district and get to know each other's personal details, the public spaces are venues they can visit as they please, while in contrast the private spaces are places they visit while conscious of what others may think of them. In these private spaces where the subjects are not constrained by family, each individual has a high level of freedom as they are able to come and go freely and there are no rules. Getting together at these places means their economic circumstances are sufficiently affluent to allow them to use their own money freely. Omori says that interaction with others outside the family living nearby by younger-elderly women in urban and rural regions is a means of enhancing the quality of life, though he does not specify differences between these two regions[9]. He also says that being able to continue with farming work enables younger elderly in farming communities to retain pride[11], and that in farming and fishing communities the gathering of several people in a friend's or neighbor's house to drink tea is a form of social interaction[21]. As mentioned above, this research also suggests that interaction with others outside the family is extremely important. However, given that this custom of drinking tea occurs within the confines of the home, it has not been included in the findings of this research. At the day service centers the healthy older-elderly realize the limitations of health as they overlay images of their future selves onto the elderly who require assistance. Consequently, it is a place where they confront their future selves. Because

the older-elderly salons are places with people of the same generation, they are places with peers who have a good understanding of their past lives which are sustaining their present selves. The general elderly salons are places with peers with whom they are getting older together, and the coffee shops are places where they can experience current trends. The public spaces are also places where they feel a sense of fulfillment and achievement from learning new things and where they are able to share a sense of achievement and a sense of competency while receiving assistance along with their peers. Hirota states that a feeling of achievement and a sense of competency spares the elderly from lethargy and strengthens their willingness to reach out to society in a positive way[22]. The elderly salon and older-elderly salon are voluntary organizations for the elderly. They are places where through the leaders their own will is reflected not only within the venues, but also to society. They are places from which the elderly who feel a sense of loneliness or isolation even in their families can convey their intentions to the outside.

In Figure 2, the nearer the left side, that is, the nearer to the day service center, the lower the level of health of those getting together. The women get together at venues with people whom they perceive as having a similar level of health to themselves. By placing themselves at a venue where there is a higher level of health they are attempting to retain their own health level and, conversely, make an effort to get together precisely because they are healthy.

Okamoto says that the integrity of identity in one's older years is achieving a truly individual way of living by incorporating newly discovered aspects of the self in oneself as a result of looking back over one's own lifetime[19]. Further, E.H. Erikson says that when one is old all sorts of past attributes take on new values[23]. In other words, it is by getting together that the older-elderly women are able to reaffirm for the first time that their wartime experiences have sustained their lives over the years and that it is through their still lively peers that they discover the meaning of holding onto their individualities and being themselves.

2. Recommendations for care

Venues where the older-elderly can get together voluntarily have been declining as a result of local body mergers and the reforms to the Long-Term Care Insurance System. At present, support is provided in line with so-called plans for the prevention of care. It is no good to simply select venues for getting together uniformly on the basis of the level of health disability. Older-elderly women want mutually supportive peers based on shared values and situations, peers with whom they have shared perceptions concerning health, peers with whom they can share a sense of liberation and achievement, and a space for doing these things which they can share. It is by getting together at such places that they wish to hold onto their individualities and to be themselves. There is a need to build communities in which voluntary groups can be developed which have several choices for conveniently located venues at which to get together. There is also a need to build groups that carry on from the younger-elderly years to the older-elderly years so that the elderly themselves can grow older together. On the other hand, it is also important to create an environment in which private spaces that transcend generations can be developed voluntarily by people in the community.

Limitations of this Research

Because the subjects were participants in salons, they are persons who are generally motivated in their lives. Consequently, the findings cannot be said to apply to all older-elderly. The meaning of getting together has to be clarified further by widening the subject base. Also, the correlation with family and the meaning of getting together somewhere outside the home are not sufficiently clear. These two issues require further attention.

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山間地域の女性後期高齢者が地域で集うことの意味づけ

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要　　旨

本研究の目的は、山間地域の女性後期高齢者が地域で集うことの意味づけを明らかにすることである。研究方法は、研究者はすべてのサロンに参加した。グランデッドセオリーアプローチを用いて、H市A地区に住む、すでに解散した後期高齢者のサロンに参加した17名を対象に半構成的面接を中心にデータ収集及び分析した。

女性後期高齢者は、自分と共通の価値観や立場、あるいは健康認識レベルに合わせて集う場を選択していることが明らかになった。集うことの意味は5つのカテゴリー《共通の価値観や立場を基盤として、支えあえる仲間の存在が実感できる》《健康認識の共有、共感、実感できる》《閉鎖的な農山村社会ゆえの解放感の満喫や自由空間の共有できる》《達成感を共有することができる》が見いだされた。自主的な集まりの場では《リーダーを通して自分たちの意思が反映される》が集う場の推進力となっていた。女性後期高齢者が集うことは、【自分らしさ、自分であることを保つこと】の中核カテゴリーが抽出された。

自分らしさ、自分であることを保つことのためには、高齢者自身が共通の価値観や立場を基盤として、支え合える仲間の存在を実感でき、健康認識の共有、共感、実感できる仲間や空間が必要である。高齢者は自分の健康認識のレベルに合わせて集う場を選択している。山間地域においては特に後期高齢者が歩いて出かけていける範囲で、公的な場、私的な場を含め、多様な型の集う場が選択できるような地域づくりが必要である。