

Type of Social Activity and Morale in Later Life: A Comparison between Male and Female¹

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Abstract

This article explored the relationship between social activity and morale among elderly in terms of gender. The data for the analysis were drawn from Hallym Aging Panel Data. This data consisted of four wave data from 2003 to 2009. The sample for this study consisted of three-wave data for 774 persons aged 54 years and over in the year of first wave. The data were analyzed using hierarchical linear model technique. The results were the following: For elderly women, morale shows a positive relationship with participation in informal activity but no significant relationship with participation in formal activity. On the contrary, for elderly men, morale shows no significant relationship with informal activity but a positive relationship with formal activity. The results of the study imply that not only the characteristics of social activity but also the characteristics of social groups are important to understand the relationship between social activity and happiness of life in old age. Namely, not all activities but activities matched with self or identity are beneficial to happiness in old age.

Key words

activity theory, gender, PGCMS, Korean elderly

Introduction

Although an aging society is a global phenomenon, the population in South Korea is aging faster than anywhere in the world. According to the OECD (2005), Japan, one of the most rapidly aging countries, took 24 years to progress from an aging society to an aged society. However

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South Korea will take only 18 years for that. Rapid population aging causes many social challenges like an increase in welfare cost and care need, and a reduction in the economic growth rate. Increased concern on quality of life in old age is one of the new challenges caused by population aging. Because of increased life expectancy, nowadays, people in South Korea can expect to live about one fourth of his/her life as elderly. In the face of this reality, people in South Korea are becoming more interested in happiness of life and quality of life in their old age.

According to the activity theory, one of the most influential theories in the field of social gerontology, the elderly would be happy only when they participate in various social activities. The activity theory, influenced by symbolic interactionism, insists that it is very important to maintain the self and self esteem for a meaningful life, and that they are strengthened by interaction with others through roles from social activity. However it seems that all the research studying happiness in old age does not support the activity theory. Based on recent empirical studies, some researchers stress the importance of quality of social interaction or the frequency of social interactions rather than joining in social activity perse (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006).

This article stresses the need for elaboration of the activity theory. The activity theory seems to suppose that all elderly are the same, namely whoever she or he is, they become similar as they age. However the elderly are not a homogenous entity. Based on gender, class, ethnicity or culture, the elderly can be divided into various groups. Thus it can be argued that the basic proposition of the activity theory between social activity and life satisfaction might be correct only when individuals or groups join the social activity which coincides with their internalized self.

This article explores the relationship between social activity and life satisfaction in terms of gender. As feminist theory strongly states, society endows one with different norms and roles by gender. According to the social role theory of sex difference (Eagly, Woods, & Diekmens, 2000), in a society based on patriarchy and male domination over female, female are given homemaker role, while male are given breadwinner roles in the labor market. Based on these different roles, men and women learn different knowledge and skills to perform the roles endowed on them. Through these processes, women and men internalize different identities as women or men, respectively.

This author hypothesizes that the types of social activities beneficial to morale in old age are different depending on sex. This study divides the social activity into informal and formal activities and analyzes the relationship between those two activities and morale in old age by gender. The results of the study will provide the new grounds for understanding the beneficial effects of social activity.

Social Activity and Happiness in Old Age

According to the activity theory, with advancing age, people experience the role loss caused by retirement, empty nest syndrome, or death of a spouse. In order to maintain life satisfaction or happiness, the elderly needs new roles to supplement the lost roles. The theory also insists that as joining a social activity is one of the most effective ways to attain a new role, joining in a social activity is helpful for the happiness in old age. In other words, as the self is formed and maintained through the roles performed and people get roles through social interaction, participation in social activity is one of the most effective ways to increase the happiness of life in old age (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953; Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972).

Many studies have tried to validate the activity theory since it appeared in the field of social gerontology. Lemon et al. (1972), one of most influential articles in the field of social gerontology, insist that participation in a social activity increases life satisfaction through the role support. They reconstructed the relationship between social activity and life satisfaction in terms of symbolic interactionism. In their view, through social activity, people received positive feedback on role performance from others and it magnified life satisfaction and/or happiness of life. For the empirical test, they divided social activity into three categories (informal, formal, and solitary activity) and then they explored the association between life satisfaction in each.

Motivated by Lemon et al. (1972), various studies have been completed investigating the association between life satisfaction and social activity. However, not all confirm the Lemon et al.'s hypothesis. For example, Longino and Kart (1982) replicated the Lemon et al.'s study with a different sample and found different results. The Longino and Kart (1982) work showed a negative relationship between life satisfaction and

formal activity, and no relationship between life satisfaction and solitary activity.

On the other hand, based on the interpretation that the key element of activity theory was not social activity but roles, some researchers explored the association between characteristics of social relationship and life satisfaction (Litwin & Shiovitz-Ezra, 2006; Reitzes, Mutran, & Verrill, 1995). Reitzes et al. (1995) proposed that not simple participation in social activity but an interaction with role related others produced positive effects on life satisfaction in old age. Furthermore Litwin and Shiovitz-Ezra (2006) showed that in old age, the quality of social tie and social relationship are more important than simple participation in social activity for self esteem.

There have been works on these topics in South Korea (J. W. Hong, 1999; Kim, 1995; Kim & Kim, 2000; Kim & Lee, 2007; Na, 2004). Generally these studies confirm a positive relationship between social activity participation and life satisfaction but some showed a difference in life satisfaction depending on the types of social activity (H. B. Hong, 2002; Kim & Lee, 2007).

Previous works on the association between social activity participation and life satisfaction focused on characteristics of social activity but not on characteristics of social groups. However, this study hypothesizes that the participation in special social activity will show positive or negative effects on life satisfaction depending on the characteristics of social groups. For example one cannot rule out the possibility that participation in same social activity would reveal different effects depending on gender.

This study focuses on the gender difference in relationship between social activity participation and life satisfaction. Until now in the field of social gerontology, works based on gender perspectives have been very rare (Schulz, 2006). However, the differences between men and women are so fundamental that it cannot be analyzed by treating gender as one of control variables (Arber & Ginn, 1995). Gender perspective is very important in understanding life in old age. First, a majority of the elderly consists of females, as women usually live longer than men do. Thus it is necessary to understand women first in order to understand life in old age.

Second, gender and aging are two of the most fundamental dimensions of social divisions. Thus it is theoretically and empirically very important

to investigate how two aspects of social division interplay with each other. To be specific, whether gender difference is maintained or not is one of the major questions in the relationship between gender and aging.

Gender Difference: Social Role and Expectation

Roles have been one of the major concepts in the early stage of sociology (Biddle, 1986). Role is the characteristic behavior to social position (Biddle, 1986). With respect to gender role, functional theory argues that women are specialized to adopt expressive roles, while men are to instrument specialization for the harmonized social integration (Parsons & Bales, 1995).

However, many feminist studies show that the division of gender role is not based on a biological or societal need (Eagly et al., 2000). Instead, they argue that the division of labor between men and women is based on the male domination over women. According to the social role theory of sex difference (Eagly et al., 2000), men and women are channeled to different social roles in patriarchal societies. Women usually take domestic work and men specialize in paid work.

Once incorporated into gender roles, women and men seek to accommodate the roles by acquiring the role-related skills. For example, as women are responsible for care work, they have to learn the knowledge and skills for communication in order to perform the role effectively. In contrast, as men are responsible for their roles in the labor markets, they have to learn knowledge and skills for the labor markets. Eagly and Steffen (1984) argue that these differences in roles also affect the personal quality. According to them, men are oriented to agentic goals and women to communal goals. Agentic qualities include self-assertion, self-expansion, and the urge to master, while communal qualities include selflessness, concern with others, and a desire to be one with others.

The differences in role and skill-specifications make different norms, role expectations and behavior patterns depending on gender. Stereotype about men and women depicts these differences. In addition, division of gender role is reproduced through the process of internalization and socialization of these stereotype and punishment mechanism in violation of the expectation on gender role.

Social Activity and Happiness in Later Life

Social activity is 'any regularized or patterned action or pursuit which is regarded as beyond routine physical or personal maintenance' (Lemon et al., 1972). Based on the intimacy and intensity of activity, social activity can be divided into three categories-informal, formal and solitary (Lemon et al., 1972). The informal activity includes the interaction with relatives, friends and neighbors. It has universal characters and focuses on emotional function. On the contrary, formal activity means an activity with formal organizations like volunteer organizations and it is based on specific objectives and focuses on the achievement of a goal. Solitary activity is an activity like watching TV, listening to the radio, or reading a newspaper.

This work postulates that the effects of social activity on life satisfaction in old age are different depending on gender. First, as females are more sensitive to emotion and sentiment of others than males, they are more likely to be happy when they engage in social activities concerning expression of emotion and sentiment. On the contrary, as men are not accustomed to expressing emotion and sentiment, they are likely to be happy when they engage in a social activity which is not related to the expression of emotion and sentiment.

Second, according to the social role theory of sex difference, if people act beyond the scope of gender stereotype, they would be blamed by others as being unwomanly women and unmanly men. Thus if an elderly female participates in public associations eagerly, she is more likely to be object of blame.

The hypotheses of this article are as follow:

First, for elderly women, participation in an informal activity will show a positive relationship with happiness. However, participation in a formal activity will show either no or negative relationship with happiness.

Second, for elderly men participation in a formal activity will show a positive relationship with happiness. However, participation in an informal activity will show either no or negative relationship with happiness.

Method

Sample

The Data for the analysis were drawn from Hallym Aging Panel Data. This data consists of four wave data from 2003 to 2009, and the same sample has been surveyed every two years for the last seven years. For this study, this author selected data from second wave to fourth wave. Thus the sample for this study consists of three-wave data for 774 persons aged 54 years and over as of the year of first wave. The characteristics of samples are in Table 1.

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variables	N/Mean score (% , S.D)		
Female (N. [%])	457 (59.04)		
Year of schooling (Mean Score[S.D])	5.94 years (4.90)		
Average age in 1 st (Mean score)	70.33 (6.74)		
Socio- economic characteristics	2nd wave	3rd wave	4th wave
N. of cohabitation with children (%)	336 (43.41)	307 (39.66)	283 (36.56)
N. of cohabitation with spouse (%)	480 (62.2)	460 (59.43)	433 (55.94)
Subjective health (Mean score)	2.87 (1.07)	2.83 (1.10)	3.10 (1.05)
Family income (Mean score)	3.60 (2.51)	3.45 (2.73)	3.28 (2.42)
Contact with children (Mean score)	6.40 (2.55)	6.25 (2.49)	5.69 (2.23)
Informal activity (Mean score)	16.4 (3.87)	15.69 (3.90)	14.19 (4.42)
Formal activity (Mean score)	1.52 (1.24)	1.81 (1.45)	1.59 (1.38)

Formal and Informal Activity

The formal activity is measured by the number of social association in participation among 12 categories. The categories include church or other religious groups, alumni society, society for people from the same hometown, family councils, volunteer groups, NGOs, senior citizen's club, community house for seniors, interest groups, leisure groups, art or music groups and sport clubs. The informal activity is constructed by the composite score of six variables which measure frequency of the contact by calling and face to face contact with brother/sister, relatives and friends/neighbors.

PGCMS Score

The outcome variable is the Philadelphia Geriatric Center Morale (PGCMS) which measures the subjective wellbeing or morale. This instrument consists of 18 items which are grouped into three factors-agitation, attitudes toward own aging and lonely dissatisfaction (Lawton, 1972). In the data, agreement on the negative emotions coded 5, and disagreement coded 1. Thus high PGCMS score means low morale.

Control Variables

According to the researches on subjective wellbeing, variety of variables shows positive or negative effects on subjective wellbeing. According to the study summarizing the 30 years of researches on subjective wellbeing (Larson, 1978), subjective health is the most strongly related to subjective wellbeing. In addition to subjective wellbeing, income, education and marital status also show positive relationship with subjective wellbeing. Some variables show even different relationship with subjective wellbeing depending on characteristics of population. According to studies in the western world, cohabitation with children has negative effect on Subjective wellbeing in later life (Litwin, 2001). However, in Korea it shows positive and negative relationship with Subjective wellbeing in later life depending on the researches (Jung, 2003; Kim & Kim, 2000). Contact with children also has different effect on subjective wellbeing depending on nationality. It shows native effects in western population (Arling, 1976) but positive in Korean population (Bae, 2004). Based on previous researches, age, education, family income, subjective health, cohabitation with children, cohabitation with spouse and contact with children are included as control variables in this analysis.

Age is measured in years and education is measured in year of schooling. Family income is measured with an 11 point scale from less than 50,000 won to over 5,000,000 won. Subjective health is accessed by a five point scale from very bad to very good. Cohabitation with children and cohabitation with spouse is a dummy variable in which zero means no cohabitation. And contact with children living separately is a composite variable which measures the frequency of contact by calling and face to face contact.

Data Analysis

The data are analyzed separately by gender because the objective of the work is to investigate whether or not different relationships between PGCMS score and social activity participation exist by gender.

Panel data consist of repeated measurement of same person. Thus if we analyze the data using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression, because of heteroscedasticity the results would be biased. Thus in this study the data is analyzed using hierarchical linear model technique. Specifically, the data is analyzed with random intercept model, assuming that intercept varies randomly according to group or ID.

Results

Analyzing the data by gender in Table 2, the results show that the male sample reports a high level of morale than does the female sample. In all three waves, men's PGCMS score is lower than that of women.

Table 2. PGCMS Score by Gender

Sample	2nd Wave (S.D)	3rd Wave (S.D)	4th Wave (S.D)
Male	41.71 (12.56) ***	43.35 (12.04) ***	43.35 (13.16) ***
Female	48.95 (13,46)	50.39 (13.78)	48.09 (12.51)
Total	45.97 (13.51)	47.50 (13.54)	46.15 (12.98)

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Turning to the relationship between major variables and PGCMS score, as shown in Table 3, participation in each of informal and formal activity shows a negative relationship with PGCMS score in the entire sample and in the two sub samples. These results seem to show that participation in a social activity has a positive effect on happiness in old age. However, the strengths of correlation show some difference depending on gender. For women, the correlation coefficient for the informal activity score is larger than that of formal activity, but for men, the correlation coefficient for the formal activity score is larger than that of informal activity.

Table 3. Correlation Score between PGCMS Score and Major Variables by Gender

Sample		2nd Wave	3rd Wave	4th Wave
Entire sample	Contact with children	-.17***	-.20***	-.17***
	Informal activity	-.18***	-.18***	-.22***
	Formal activity	-.25***	-.24***	-.29***
Female	Contact with children	-.15**	-.18***	-.14*
	Informal activity	-.25***	-.24***	-.20***
	Formal activity	-.15**	-.15**	-.18***
Male	Contact with children	-.21***	-.18**	-.22***
	Informal activity	-.11*	-.11*	-.27***
	Formal activity	-.23***	-.20***	-.33***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

These preliminary analyses show that regardless of social activity type and sex, joining social activity would be beneficial for life in old age. To see if the relationship holds after introducing control variables, the author estimates the relationship using multivariate analysis. Also estimated is the relationship in all three samples - entire sample, men and women, separately. The results are in Table 4.

Table 4. Multivariate Analysis by Gender

Variables	Entire sample		Male		Female	
	B	SE	B	SE	B	SE
Age	-1.19	.74	.21	.07**	-.03	.06
Year of schooling	-.39	.07***	-.24	.11*	-.52	.10***
Sex	-1.19	.74				
Income	-1.02	.13***	-.78	.17***	-1.23	.18***
Subjective health	-3.91	.24***	-3.39	.34***	-4.27	.33***
Cohabitation with spouse (0=no)	-1.47	.69*	-3.44	1.32**	-.76	.82
Cohabitation with children (0=no)	.39	.64	.93	.93	.12	.87
Contact with children	-.33	.10**	-.36	.15*	-.30	.14*
Informal activity	-.21	.06**	-.07	.09	-.30	.08***
Formal activity	-.62	.20**	-.70	.25**	-.54	.33
Intercept	67.11	3.68***	50.94	5.84***	76.42	4.83***

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

First, the results show that education is negatively related to PGCMS score and income also has a negative relationship with PGCMS score. The results report that subjective health is negatively related to PGCMS score too. These results are statistically valid in all three analyses.

However, the association between age and PGCMS score is different depending on sex. For women, age shows no significant relationship with PGCMS score. However for men, the relationship turns out a positive one. It would be due to the fact that for elderly men, once they are lost, some roles are very difficult to be supplemented by others. For example, both roles in the labor market and the public organization are not easy to substitute with new ones, once they are lost with age. Thus as activity theory put it, it seems that men's role loss without substitution leads to a decrease in self-esteem and happiness in old age.

Second, variables related to cohabitation also show a different association with PGCMS score depending on sex. For men, cohabitation with a spouse has a negative relationship with PGCMS score. However for women cohabitation with a spouse shows no relationship with it. One possible interpretation of this is that men in South Korea are usually not good at housework. Thus after divorce with or death of their spouse, the daily life of men becomes much harsher than before.

Among variables on family, the contact with children shows a negative relationship with PGCMS score. In general, through frequent contact with each other, it is more likely to understand each other and exchange support more (Wellman, 1981). That could be one of the reasons for a negative relationship between contact and PGCMS score to exist.

Third, if the activity theory is correct, participation in social activity will show a linear relationship with PGCMS score regardless of type of social activity. In analysis with entire population, regardless of type of social activity, participation shows a negative relationship with PGCMS score. However in separate analysis by sex, we can see a different picture. For women, PGCMS score shows a negative relationship with participation in informal activity but no significant relationship with participation in formal activity. On the contrary, for men, PGCMS score shows no significant relationship with informal activity but a negative relationship with formal activity. It seems that these results support the hypotheses proposed earlier in this paper.

Discussion

Activity theory insists that participation in social activity results in an increase of the life satisfaction or happiness in old age. Symbolic interactionism explains this through the relationship between self and happiness (Lemon et al., 1972). The theory posits that people define themselves through the interaction with others and they would be happy when they feel affirmation of their own self. The theory also suggests that role is very important because self can only be defined and affirmed through the various roles she or he takes. Thus if roles are lost with advancing age, she or he could maintain the level of happiness by participating in various social activities that substitute new roles with old one. After the advent of the activity theory, although lots of empirical works have been done under the premise of the activity theory, there seems no agreed conclusion on the relationship between participation in social activity and happiness in old age.

This work argues that there is a need for the elaboration of the activity theory. As symbolic interactionism says, if the self is constructed by the social interaction, then many types of selves can exist, depending on the type or characteristics of social interaction. Thus only when she or he participates in social activities similar to the socially constructed self, then the positive effect of those activities on happiness would appear.

For the empirical test of the argument, this study analyzes what types of social activities are beneficial to morale in old age by gender. According to the social role theory of sex difference, in the patriarchy society, male and female are channeled to different roles and this gives men and women a different sense of self and norms for behavior. Based on this theory, this study postulates that there would be different association between types of social activities and happiness in old age depending on gender. The results seem to confirm the hypothesis. The implication of the research is summarized as follows:

First, the results of the study imply that not only the characteristics of social activity but also the characteristics of social groups are important to understand the relationship between social activity and happiness of life in old age. Namely, not all activities but activities matched with self or identity are beneficial to happiness in old age. Activity theory seems

to suppose that all elderly are the same. Namely, whoever she or he is, they become similar as they become elderly. However the elderly are not a homogenous entity. Elderly could be divided into many different groups depending on gender, class or ethnicity and each group has its own notion of self or identity. Thus the basic proposition of the activity theory between social activity and life satisfaction might hold true only when individuals or groups join the social activity which coincides with their internalized self.

Second, some research (Rossi, 1986) argues gender role difference is weakened with advancing age. In other words, because both men and women lost their gender roles by experiencing retirement, empty nest syndrome, or a death of spouse, the difference of identity between men and women would fade away. Connecting the argument with this work, we can postulate that all the social activity would be beneficial to happiness in old age because of a weakened gender role. However it seems that the results of this study do not support the argument. Although men seem to assist household work more in their old age than in their middle age, it does not mean the differences in gender role and identity have vanished.

Third, in South Korea, it is not abnormal that elderly parents live with their children (Ministry for Health, Welfare and Family Affairs, 2009). However based on the results that cohabitation shows no significant effect on PGCMS score, this tradition doesn't seem to be always good for elderly parents. Surely, by cohabiting with their children, elderly parents receive support and various other benefits. However with cohabitation, the independence of life in old age is likely to be diminished. Thus the results show that the benefits of cohabitation be counterbalanced by the disadvantages of cohabitation.

In conclusion, the results showed the gender specific relationship between types of social activity and morale. This study has made original contribution to our understanding of various relationships between types of social activity and morale in old age. A limitation of the work is that the type of social activity is not measured accurately. For an accurate analysis, more detailed response categories are needed. In addition, not included are some variables that reflect the quality of social activity. Previous studies on this topic stressed that the frequency and quality of

participation be measured precisely. However because the data are not designed for the activity theory, variables reflecting the quality of social activity in the analysis also can not be included.

It appears that the activity theory is correct only when it takes into account the type of activity and characteristics of the social group at the same time.

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