

Sexual Relationships of Elderly Males Who Have Lost Their Spouses

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This paper focuses on the sexual behavior and view of the 60-70's age. The author investigate how an intimate relation with the opposite sex is formed, and how they act in their life, what kind of meaning of the opposite sex friend exist on their life. Subjects were three men over sixty living in suburban Tokyo and Osaka who lost their spouses and stayed widowers since, but having sexual relationships at present. Data were collected through a semi-structured interviewing and observation. Results reveal that though the subjects realize a diminishing physical function, they refuse to accept the negative labeling regarding their mental condition. Having a relationship with the current partners is like having a pseudo-marriage, bringing high spirits and a feeling of happiness. Sexuality functions as a realization of their masculinity as well as bringing them physical pleasure; the existence of a female partner could also help elevate their self-esteem.

Keywords: elderly people, social norm, sexual relationship, sexual desire.

Artikel ini mencermati perilaku seksual dan pandangan mereka yang berusia 60-70-an. Penulis meneliti bagaimana hubungan mesra dengan lawan jenis terbentuk dan bagaimana mereka berperilaku dalam kehidupannya, dan apa makna keberadaan teman lawan jenisnya tersebut. Para subjek adalah tiga duda berusia di atas 60-an yang kehilangan istrinya dan tetap menduda, namun memiliki hubungan seksual saat ini. Data diperoleh melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dan observasi. Hasil-hasil mengungkapkan bahwa para subjek yang walaupun mengakui mengalami kemunduran fisik, namun mereka menyangkal pelabelan negatif yang dikanakan terhadap kondisi mentalnya. Memiliki hubungan dengan mitranya dirasakan sebagai pseudo-pernikahan yang mampu mempertahankan semangatnya dan menimbulkan rasa senang. Seks berfungsi juga sebagai realitas kejantanannya sekaligus memberikan kenikmatan jasmaniah; adanya mitra perempuan juga meningkatkan rasa percaya dirinya.

Kata kunci: manusia usia lanjut, norma sosial, hubungan seksual, gairah seksual.

Sexual health is an important component to enhance quality of life (Montreal Declaration, 2005) and it is related to people's physical function and desire. Nevertheless, Japan has a social and cultural background in which the sexual life of elderly people is regarded negatively (Becker, 1984). Elderly people involved in love affairs are generally treated with disrespect (Yoshizawa, 1986). This is quite contrary to numerous cases where elderly people are considered superior to younger people in terms of ability and personality.

Sociological studies in Japan have not treated elderly people's intimacy or sexual behaviors with the opposite sex as an important subject of research. It is not only because sexuality itself is considered to be a very

private phenomenon with negligible social effect, but also because researchers have difficulties getting into the private aspects of individual sexual behavior. In other words, it has been thought that sexual matters including both definition of genders (masculinity vs. femininity) and sexual behaviors (premarital, marital, or extramarital) are only related to the behavioral code of each member of society that will not be handed down to future generations (Matsuzono, 1987). Therefore, sexual matters have been regarded as having insignificant social effect.

However, sexual matters should not be considered as private aspects because individuals decide what to do according to both their intentions and social norms. There are several reasons why society denies the sexual behavior of elderly people: social misunderstanding and disregard for them resulting from their short life expectancy and denial of their social value due to little possibility of reproduction in their remarriage or sexual behavior.

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Elderly people have been placed lower on the social ladder and recognized as being relatively incompetent. Their sexual behavior has been hidden or subject to inhibition because romantic affairs generally give a playful impression. Even though elderly people live in a society where their sexual behavior is denied, some of them give serious deliberation to possible sexual encounters. Furthermore, since "presence of sexual relationships influences the degree of satisfaction of life" (World Congress of Sexology, 2005), sexual relationships at an elderly stage of life cannot be depreciated. I may here find a good example of delabeling, that is, to change the unfair conditions given by society to more preferable ones (Tsuji 2001).

I interviewed elderly males in the suburbs of Tokyo and Osaka. My study I aimed to indicate how these elderly males obtained sexual relationships after losing their spouses and as a result what sort of human relationships they achieved. In the process, I observed a variety of social restrictions imposed upon them in terms of sex in old age and how they were struggling to cope with the restrictions.

Preceding Studies

Among preceding studies, some focused on an institutional aspects (e.g. family system or institution of marriage) and others discussed the relation between sexual behavior and social systems or cultural backgrounds in a cross-cultural method (Becker 1984, Fukuya & Unuma, 1996). They argued that the sexual norm of a society is manifested in various ways depending on the social situation of each person. Therefore, the possibility for males and females to form a good relationship involving sex may decrease unless they have a mutual understanding of each other's social and cultural backgrounds.

Among the studies of sexual behavior at the elderly stage of life, some discussed relationships between sexual interest and sexual behavior (Horiguchi 2008, Inoue, Araki, & Okawa, 1991) and others investigated realities of sexual behavior and awareness (Araki 2007, Higashi 2007; 2008, Japan Society of Sexual Science, 2007). The sexual interest at the elderly stage of life is not so different from that at the stage of adolescence or middle age, and sexual desire decreases physically with age but does not fade away. However, there is a gender gap in this aspect and it has been shown that men display a stronger desire than women

It has been also clarified by actual condition surveys that elderly people show a great sexual desire, indicating

that single elderly people without company of the opposite sex seek company. The studies suggest that women have more difficulty in getting a partner than men, but the authors do not describe the reasons sufficiently. Even though men have an interest in sex and women, few of them take actual action in real life (Japan Society of Sexual Science, 2007); so the studies indicate there is something in society that suppresses sexual behavior at the elderly stage of life.

The studies of ageism have dealt with invisible suppression of sexual behavior at the elderly stage in life. These studies point out that a decision made regarding sexual behavior is influenced not only by each person's sexual norm or age-related rules but also by others' prejudice against sexual behavior and age (Yoshizawa, 1986).

It is said that Japanese society tends to be positive towards elderly people because we have a culture to respect them (Komatsu 2002). On the contrary, there is a practice of abandonment of elderly people, which is based on the concept that the sixtieth birthday is the end of life cycle (Miyata, 1996); this concept is related with an idea that elderly people are very close to the dead without any social roles (Komatsu 2002). Elderly people are recognized as socially dysfunctional by both themselves and others; as a result, their sexual behavior is suppressed (Koyano 1992, Tsuji 2001).

The labeling of elderly people through negative ageism may be avoided by their intension to hit back against such labeling. The timing when people recognize they are old varies between men and women, and people with higher education tend to deny the labeling (Tsuji, 2001). Thus, Tsuji clarified some aspects of awareness of elderly people, but he does not mention what measures and actions elderly people should take for delabeling

What makes the difference between some people who seek a new partner (new human relationship) after the death of their spouses and others who do not? According to past research, because the relation between husband and wife is weaker than that between parents and children (Koyano 1992, Tamano 1989), it is said that separation by death of spouse does not contribute so much to a survivor's subjective feeling of happiness or loneliness (Koyano 1992, Yuzawa 1986). However, there is a research that indicates importance of the restructuring of human relationships for men after losing their spouses (Akazawa & Mizukami, 2008, Okamura, 1991).

Though the relation with surrounding people contributes much to men's life adjustment, it is said that men are not so capable of forming a social network. This is not peculiar to Japanese society, because studies

in other countries show similar observations. It is shown that the monthly social expenses of Japanese men are smaller than those of women (National survey on consumption 2004). Attention should be paid to the difficulties for men to form new human relationships as well as to the way for them to overcome their difficulties. The situation may also vary depending on whether the relation is aimed at men or women.

The studies of elderly men who try to start a new relation with specific women (i.e. a new partner) after losing their spouses were done in the 1980s (Takahashi, 1985; Akai, 1984; Mori, 1980). Takahashi used the questionnaire method for his survey of 230 people (male and female) to make clear that both men and women tended to prefer commuting relationships without formal marriage. Among the studies of marriage at the elderly stage in life conducted outside Japan, there was research performed by McKain (1969) in the US. The study clarified the reality of elderly people's remarriage and the inhibitors, suggesting that prejudice against sexual behavior at an elderly age was a large problem. McKain provided some suggestions for successful marriage among elderly people.

Gender standards have defined that men are strong while women are weak in Japan, which is a modern industrial society; however, life events including retiring at the retirement age necessitate converting the gender roles regarded as self-evident into completely different ones

At such an important moment, numerous men experience a total loss of the role as breadwinner as well as of occupational positions, which comprise the core of their identity. They are then forced to be included in the same category as jobless women or full-time housewives, resulting in a feeling of reduced happiness. The fact that the society to which men belong often shifts from the modern industrial one to a local community and the people with whom men are associated become wholly different gives them added stress (Takahashi, 1990, Okamura, 1991).

A review of past studies shows that there are numerous people who want a social life including sexual activity at the elderly stage in life, and that the social norms concerning age, sexuality and gender as well as others' prejudice such as ageism influences their decision making. It also indicates that research of sexual behavior requires individual qualitative investigations and comprehension of the subjects' social and cultural backgrounds and the circumstances of their life.

Method

Overview of the Research

I performed semi-structured interviewing of five men who were over sixty and had the experience of losing their spouses. I could make out changes in their awareness and reality regarding human relationships after the loss, and their awareness toward sexual behavior and women as well as reality. I used approximately two hours for each interview. In this paper I will comment on three men who have sexual relationships at present. The investigations were done from October 2009 to January 2010.

Informants

The men surveyed live in a middle suburban city in Tokyo and in a large city in Osaka and I used snowball sampling for the interview. All the three men lost their spouses and stayed widowers since; they had married children and unmarried middle-aged children. All of them did not declare openly to their children that they had a specific partner, but they guessed the children "may have noticed it".

Analysis and Observation

It took them some time after they lost their spouses before they formed a special close relation with another woman. After they had experienced certain 'breaks' in life's continuity including retiring or separation by death from their spouses (Tsuji, 2001), they undertook an underlying task that can be described as confirmation of self continuity.

After a man loses his spouse, he gives up some parts of his lifestyle and keeps up other parts. It was observed that the subjects changed their lifestyles in three ways while establishing a sexual relation. I will make an analysis in relation to the subjects of this study (how elderly males executed delabeling in order to obtain sexual relationships after losing their spouses in a society in which elderly people's sexual behavior is denied, and as a result what sort of human relationships they achieved) while paying attention to the process of their encounter with a special partner, start of dating and maintenance of relationships. The men who have currently sexual relationships feel unhappy when they are called "elderly"; they do not recognize themselves as elderly. They belong to what is called "the elderly-denial type" (Tsuji 2001).

New encounter and departure from the norms.

Sexual relationships of men who became single after losing their spouses were criticized by others and frequently talked about. They felt they were treated differently depending on how many years had passed after the separation by death. They were advised by others to leave their house and start living with their children's families; it was because they were now facing inconveniences after losing the women who had taken care of them. At first, they felt it unnecessary to live with their children's families because they thought they were confident in their housework; however, all of them finally accepted their married children's offer to live with their families and are living with them now.

If the pillar of the parents-children relations is one between mother and children and the other between father and children is not firmly established, the death of mother may be deemed to strengthen the relation between father and children; however, even though the father and the children begin to see each other more frequently, it will be difficult to alter and develop the heretofore relation between them because there is no base for furthering the relationship, which should have been formed over the long term. If this is the case, it may be easy for such men to create new relationships with other women rather than attempting to deepen father-children intimacy without a firm base to foster it.

In the beginning, they struggled to get over the wall (code of behavior) implicitly imposed upon them by taking action to meet a specific women. Indeed they felt it necessary to accede to the socially expected image for elderly widowers, while they also felt it was too early and had an internal wish to reconfirm their existence as a man. The internal wish included sexual desire and they took a step forward seeking new partners. Their wish for the encounters were realized through introduction by their brothers or ex-colleagues, or through actively working on a woman (what does this mean?) in the same hobby group.

Disengagement from negative stereotypical views of elderly people. The respondents dislike being labeled as elderly people by others, have negative feelings about being treated as an elderly person, and endeavor to disengage themselves from negative stereotypes. As for their appearance, they regularly exercise at a gym, receive medical checkups to watch their physical condition, and try to dress younger than their age, and so forth. As far as their spirit is concerned, they frequently look through magazines or check out websites in order to obtain information on popular expressions or arts/amusement spots. Also, they are

interested in information regarding financial management to be able to afford to enjoy their daily life and social occasions comfortably.

"I cannot stand the stereotype of treating you as old once you retire from work. I could work much better than young "NEETs" (not in education, employment or training) or "freeter" (job-hopping part-timer) of no use."

"I believe that appearance should make a huge difference - some people look much older or younger than their actual age."

Recreational factors for romance among elderly people.

As sexual behavior without the purpose of reproduction tends to be considered something recreational, they are careful to act prudently and keep a restrained attitude. It applies not only to their children, relatives, neighbors or friends, but also to strangers such as passengers in a train or passers-by in the street.

They consider their relationship with the current partners as one separated from their own existing matrimony with a reproductive purpose, and they establish a "separately-living, de facto marriage relationship" with the partners, or new "pseudo-marriage relationship" if you can call it that. Sexuality functions as a realization of their masculinity as well as bringing them physical pleasure, and the existence of female partners also helps to elevate their self-esteem.

"If you have a reliable sexual partner, you will be able to raise your relationship to a different level. You can enjoy a sense of security, or make jokes with each other."

"I'd like to spend fun time with her as much as possible, and treat her as a special woman, if I have a girlfriend who treats me very nicely."

Liberation from masculinity. On the occasion of retirement or losing their spouses, or having their children financially independent, they come to realize they don't need to act like a breadwinner or a supporter any more and enjoy more freedom as they are liberated from such roles. On the other hand, they feel others are curious about them as widowers who are free from their domestic roles. They also feel restrained constantly.

"My children have their own life and family, and they are doing fine, so I don't have to wield my parental authority any more."

"When I stood chatting (with my girlfriend) regarding our club activities on the way home from a supermarket, housewives in the neighborhood asked me about her a few days later. They said, 'Who was the lady you were chatting with?'"

"The rumor about us spread quickly. This is the risk of dating with someone in the neighborhood. She particularly dislikes such trouble, and we don't want neighborhood rumors to ruin our relationship, either"

Beginning and Establishing New Relationships

When they became intimate with their specific women, they were criticized by others: "it is so soon after they lost their wives". The men surveyed felt displeasure because others interfered with their private human relationships.

They were staying with one of their children's family and were feeling the need to suppress their sexual desire. Then, they took a chance to shift a part of their financial support from their children to their new partners when they developed a new relationship. This was done because they valued their own inner intentions more than others' opinions and evaluations.

It was men who paid for various expenses. This was because men had bigger pensions and they thought it was reasonable for them to pay, considering the women's household economy. The main items of monthly expenses were lodging, meals and gasoline. The expenses far surpassed those for a member of men's hobby group (a man in men's group: about 5,000 yen, man and woman: 15,000 yen).

As for dating places, ordinary places were not preferred and they sometimes went for a long drive. Art museums, natural museums, places with abundant nature and lodging facilities were visited frequently. They took a trip several times a year.

As for information collection, they said the Internet was convenient but more frequently they obtained information from their married male friends. They said it was easy to collect information about date spots from those friends.

Maintaining of masculinity. Once they obtain sexual partners, they try to elaborate in collecting information on sexual intercourse for elderly people and maintaining their physical fitness. Specifically, they collect information about sex through pornographic videos and the Internet. They also revisit home doctors which used to be a hassle for them, or try to obtain information on new clinics from elderly people in the

neighborhood. They point out that diabetes has a negative impact on sexual activity, and one of the respondents was advised by his male friend in the neighborhood to regularly watch out for symptoms for high blood pressure and how to prevent the symptoms from occurring. The other comment is that health is a common issue for elderly people, and it will help to facilitate a conversation even with strangers. To collect information on sex and health for dating is also shown to expand social networks with neighbors.

"I only talked with my wife during the time she became ill and passed away. I have been enjoying chatting with my neighbors since I was widowed."

"We often have a great talk about health among men. We exchange information on our doctors or clinics, even if we know each other only because we are neighbors, as long as we consult the same doctor. I also appreciate their sharing information about locations for dating or new restaurants. As for the topic of sex, I sometimes mention it under cover of urology. But I feel embarrassed to talk about it openly, so I educate myself about sex. I hardly have any critical information."

A desire for taking care of someone. They have a desire to look after their female partners, and they actually offer to clean the house or cook meals. It is often not realized because their female partners insist they should maintain their own privacy. This stems from their desire to compensate for what they could not do for their deceased wives during their marriage as well as a sense of release from sexual norms in relation to matrimony with a reproductive purpose where they refrained from expressing love. When they receive appreciation from their girlfriends for their intentions or qualifications in filling both male and female roles, their motivations for house chores and the expression of love are increased.

"I enjoyed our marriage. However, I sometimes feel distressed when I think about what I should have done for her at that time."

"I was so busy (with my work) when our children were small, so I don't feel like I was heavily involved in raising them. Maybe that is why I want to take care of someone now after all this time. I wonder why I feel like fostering or looking after someone. Although my girlfriend seems irritated, we are getting along well."

They don't mind if they are considered as a minority. Although many elderly people desire to be romantically attached, they also understand only a few people find their ideal partners in reality. As they realize this in their actual life, the respondents consider themselves as a minority in society. Even if others have negative perspectives on their romance or sexual activities, they would not refrain from dating with their girlfriends, as they realize the positive effects they gain from partners such as reinforcing self-esteem or sense of happiness.

"I understand how the neighbors think of our relationship – it should not be welcoming. They criticize me for accompanying her (to a community event) despite the fact we are not married."

"I usually wait my turn in the waiting room at the hospital (with my girlfriend). We don't care what others think of us anymore. Our only concern is to keep our family from enduring awkward positions."

Wisdom for maintaining relationships: new roles are added to the existing ones. In order to avoid negative labeling by others, they considered it effective to demonstrate they were properly playing the roles they had before starting the new relationship. In other words, they should demonstrate to their friends and neighbors how they continued to play the roles as a parent and a husband. Specifically, these roles include living with their children and undertaking Buddhist praying for their late wife. They were deeply attached to their late wives and children and told this feeling to their new partners. The women also had children with an experience of separation by husband's death. These similar familial situations on both sides led to mutually acknowledged rules in their relationships, namely the rules that they respect partner's family and they would not interfere unnecessarily with the partner's family matters.

The men started playing two roles, as a father and as a lover (a quasi-husband) separately when they began the relationship. In their relationship with their children, they took it upon them to provide a sanctuary for their children, hoping that they would be respected, while in the relationship with the new partner they wanted to take care of them, hoping to play the role of protector.

As a man. They emphasize they will never forget their deceased wives or lose their memories about being with them. The relationship with their new partners is placed as an extension of their life with their deceased wives. Also, they pay attention to their behavior or

remarks, not forcing their partners to lessen the memories of their deceased husbands. They feel they empathize with each other, as they believe their relationship started because they shared the same experience of surviving their spouses.

The reason why they do not insist on marriage or living together with their new partners is partly because they would rather maintain their existing relationship with their children or neighbors. Considering the diversification of marriage among the younger generation such as "a de facto marriage" or "a commuter marriage," however, they call their marriage style "a night-visitation marriage," living separately without official registration, and equate it with a regular husband-wife relationship.

"My deceased wife was a wonderful lady to me. Both of them are important for me individually. I should not compare them."

"As the life with my wife will go on forever, I should value hers (with the deceased husband) as well. I believe our relationship will not last unless we accept both of our memories. I wish she could only care for me, but I cannot ask for such a thing, as I still cherish the memory of my wife."

As a father. They consider the relationship with their married children as adult-like relationship since they are now financially independent. On the other hand, they believe they should continue supporting their unmarried children in regard to performing parental roles. This is based on the idea a child becomes fully-grown when she/he is married. They tend to refrain from introducing their dates to the families unless the children get married, and the partners show their understanding.

It is also implied they show paternal sentiment for the partners' children as well. When they consult about them with their children, the respondents listen to the girlfriends with sympathy and provide them with appropriate advice, making the most of their knowledge or experience.

"Although our relationship does not take the form of marriage, I try to act as if I'm married to her. I do my best to support her life, and resolve problems together if she has concerns (about her children). I also share my issues with children or grandchildren (with her)."

"In my opinion, I must take responsibility for those close to her; as long as I decide to be part of her entire life. Well, it should be limited to her children, though. (It will not extend to other people, e.g. relatives.)"

A strong sense of “unchanging self” They tend to consider themselves as continually sexually active as they were during their adolescence and ‘prime’ years, although their social roles have changed or they have been released from such social roles. Although they do not deny a loss of sexual desire or lowering of sexuality, they still believe they are unchanged mentally. They occasionally become impatient once they engage in sexual activity with their partners. In sharing physical activities with specific partners, they positively accept the lowering of their physical functions caused by aging, if they have such women who grow older hand in hand.

They consider themselves unchanged since they lost their spouses, even since their adolescence and ‘prime’ years. They rather believe that relationships with others have changed. They think others are labeling them as old in a negative/positive way, although they have not changed at all.

They realize they are experiencing a decline in physical function even if their spirit is still uplifted. They consider it unavoidable because of aging; however, they can accept the fact easily since a variety of treatments including medical care are widely available. In conclusion, it is implied they refuse to accept the negative labeling from others regarding their mental condition.

“When I’m being in a romantic situation, I feel the same way as I did when I was young. My type of women also has not changed very much.”

“I feel confused when others think it is weird if I have sexual desires. They think I’m too old for that, and it makes me upset. I have my own way of enjoying my sexual life (from way back), so I wonder how they dare tell me what to do.”

Conclusion

Elderly men were forced to accept a certain degree of social isolation in order to get rid of the stereotyped image given to elderly people and to achieve sexual relationships in a society in which their sexual behavior was denied. They used sexual relationships as a means to reconfirm their existence as a man. They considered the aged period still as one of the developing life stages. They used arbitrarily the invisible rules and standards for the aged by interpreting them extensively, so that they could justify themselves and stay in the society after losing social positions and youth; they sometimes dealt with the social stigma for the aged by simply ignoring others’ expectations. It may be called the skillful strategy of the weak in the world governed by the strong.

It was shown that elderly men could maintain their own identity by means of their own practices even though they were placed disadvantageously in the society. These practices enabled them to continuously hold up their identity which was in danger of collapsing due to aging, and to achieve a new partner who came to know them very well and assisted them to make up for the loss of their spouses who had known them best. It was a kind of happiness attained by the people who decided not to play a role of sacred elderly people, not to pretend to have fallen asleep, or to give up behaviors worthy of respect; they made up their mind to be isolated as minority in the modern society.

There are not so many opportunities for elderly people to learn about sexual issues. Consult in such issues might bring about ageism among elderly people. The men surveyed felt uneasiness when they felt ignorant about their physical changes due to aging.

The preceding studies on ageism of elderly people have clarified numerous factors giving rise to these problems. What this study wanted to add was an analysis and interpretation of the behavior by elderly males who lost their spouses; these men used sexual relationships and sexual behavior so that they were able to remove the negative labeling imposed on them. This study analyzed several cases of their sexual relationships in a step-by-step manner. As a result of the analysis, it was suggested that the factors leading to individual actions include not only individual intentions, but also how they themselves and other members of society comprehend social rules and norms, and it was also suggested that these factors interacted with each other.

This study emphasized that having a female sexual partner brought about high spirits which can be called a feeling of happiness to the elderly men. This is quite different from the results of preceding studies that concluded the existence of a partner of the opposite sex was not correlated with a feeling of happiness. Considering the results of the preceding studies that men are not so good at forming networks, I may say that this study indicated that research should be done separately on both relationships with the same sex and with the opposite sex.

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