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## DEBATE

### Which Self is 'Ageless'?

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### Which Self is 'Ageless'?

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“The self is the agent of a life: the ambiguously self-aware progenitor of the most deeply grounded and all-encompassing existential project a person can be involved in – being you, making the life you have.”  
(Steven Parish 2008,4)

“Old age isn't a state of mind. It's an existential situation.”  
(Ursula K. LeGuin 2017, 13)

The first time I was called out during fieldwork for referring to 'seniors' is vividly etched into my memory. It happened during a discussion at an 'Elder Welfare Center' (*rōjin fukushi senta*), a municipally managed community building hosting various clubs and classes open to anyone over the age of sixty, located in Kyoto. Having just arrived in Japan for fieldwork, I was excited to have already secured an introduction. As I sat at the table with the center's director and three regular attendees, I confidently launched into my pitch to hold a special event so that I could introduce myself and start a discussion about general topics related to aging in Japan with the men and women who used the center. This was going to be my fieldwork debut, and I was sure that everyone there would enthusiastically assent. I was doing my best to impress, using polite, formal Japanese, as I stumbled through the explanation of how interested I was in the perspectives of seniors, when I was suddenly interrupted sharply by one of the regulars, a tall man with a well-groomed moustache and bolo string necktie.

“Seniors?! Who are these 'seniors' you're talking about? There are no 'seniors' here!”

The mood had suddenly tensed, and my impulse to laugh was caught in my throat. I smiled, frozen in shock and embarrassment, desperately trying to assess what had just happened: Was this comment meant to be a joke? Surely, they identified as 'seniors' if they are spending their days at an *Elder Welfare Center*? The center director jumped in to ease the tension, explaining that my fumble was simply due to the fact that I was a non-native speaker. I apologized to everyone and managed to continue, carefully avoiding any words like 'senior' that might connote 'old age.' Still, the incident left me a little confused. How was I to learn anything about growing older in Japan if older people didn't identify as old? How could I determine the focus of my research if 'old age' did not constitute an identity or even a meaningful stage of the life course? What did the man mean by 'There are no seniors here'?

Fortunately, the meeting ended amicably and I was invited to come back to the center. I made these visits a regular part of my weekly schedule, sneaking into the different activity groups to learn traditional dancing or watch classic movies. As I got to know the attendees, I soon began to get a sense of why the term 'senior' (*kōreisha*) might have sparked such a strong response. To me, it had seemed like the most neutral term for the category of 'older person,' and was used frequently in newspapers

and scholarly articles alike. Alternate Japanese words used to identify someone as older carried too much baggage. The word used in the name of the center, 'elder' (*rōjin*), for example, retained a kind of old-fashioned overtone of the wise and 'honorable elder,' while at the same time, it suggested frailty, dependence, and senility. It was rarely used in everyday conversations in a positive way. The term 'senior,' by contrast, tended to be reserved for use in more professional, administrative, or clinical contexts. It simply meant a category of people over the age of 65. Although more technical, its association with institutions related to social dependence and burden (forced retirement, pensions, discount bus passes, etc.) was something that the users of the Center were all taking great pains to avoid. As John Traphagan (2006) pointed out in his research on being a 'good *rōjin*' in Japan, involvement in social activities and clubs at places like the center is strongly tied to moral imperatives to preserve independence and avoid becoming burdensome on others in later life. Whether the activity was mainly physical (ballroom dancing), cognitive (crafts), or social (karaoke), there were frequent comments among participants about things like relatively minor lapses in memory, as well as more serious illness and impairment. All of this talk flowed eventually towards the concern that if they did not do more, they would soon reach a point where they would have to get help from children or professional care 'helpers.'

Would these men and women at the Elder Welfare Center think of themselves as ageless? Or to be more precise, would they agree with Sharon Kaufman (1993) when she states, "Old people do not perceive meaning in aging itself so much as they perceive meaning in being themselves in old age" (1993, 14)? Many, no doubt, would, though not without some hesitance. They certainly didn't want to take on a label of 'senior' along with the meanings those supposedly neutral terms obtained as they circulated through institutions, bureaucracies, and public discourses. While the intellectual contributions of Sharon Kaufman's oeuvre are beyond debate, and her carefully stated empirical findings regarding self-perception among older adults in the late seventies US West Coast are compelling, generalizing the conclusions of *The Ageless Self* requires critical consideration of the ways subjectivities are politically and historically situated. One of the dangers of theorizing too broadly on the basis of Kaufman's findings is that it risks downplaying the role of the social and political context in which ageless selves are produced, lending itself to neoliberal notions of selfhood.

Most people at the Center were born just a few years prior to the post-war baby boom generation (1947-'49). Their retirements coincided with a rapid rise in neoliberal policy rhetoric around prevention, responsibility, and independence, with all the moral and ideological force that entailed (Moore 2017). With the establishment of a new Long-Term Care Insurance system in the early 2000's, a new vocabulary re-inscribed the boundaries of old age, with 'customers' of care services on one side, and old 'patients' on the other. Old age was not only pathologized, but it was transformed into an incurable lifestyle disease, that people at the Center wanted to avoid it all costs. Japanese popular media is more direct in voicing the terror of becoming a 'senior.' Lonely deaths (*kodokushi*) (Danely 2019), care murders (*kaigo satsujin*) (Saito 2017), and other viscerally shocking images saturate media representations of a national population aging as a crisis of "no future" (Allison 2013, 23). The reluctance among older people to adopt negatively weighted categories of 'old age' and to actively resist them by adopting narratives aligned with "successful" or "active aging" (whether in the US or Japan or elsewhere) (Lamb 2017), reveals how an 'aged self' falls outside of the structure of values of modern society and its future—it becomes "unspeakable" (Cohen 1998, 184).

Historically contingent discourses constrain the possibilities for personal experiences of aging to be felt and appraised as meaningful. However, older Japanese adults are also not entirely oblivious to these discourses and may strive to find other ways of recovering a sense of meaning in old age. One such experience of the current cohort of older adults in Japan is caring for older parents, without the benefits

of extended family support, often over long periods of time marked by chronic debility. Unlike the older sample of San Franciscans Kaufman spoke to (born decades earlier), caring for older parents in advanced old age had a major impact on the Japanese baby boomers' own sense of longevity, and their hopes that their own children would not experience the same hardships of providing unpaid care. Projects of healthy aging at places like the Center are not only aimed at buffering the effects of age-related physical and mental decline, but they are also a way of restoring a hopeful future for one's own children. As Markus and Kitayama (1991, 245-246) explain, in Japan, "relations with others in specific contexts are defining features of the self." That is, the Japanese self is not only construed in relation to others, but includes others within its boundaries (Markus and Kitayama 1991, 245). The self that is ageless lacks this capacity. It is only by virtue of age that a Japanese person can be part of generational relationships rather than outside of them, and such self-construal brings an alternate meaning to healthy aging based in kinship rather than the separate and independent self.

As anthropologists who have worked with other structurally marginalized groups have demonstrated, selves overflow the power of cultural and biopolitical narratives (Stevenson 2014). They show that selves – ageless or aged – are not things that are determined or contained by discourses. Part of the power of Kaufman's ethnography, and a reason why it is still important, is precisely the way it revealed the weakness of historical events and institutional structures to determine the shared and meaningful identities for people across the life course. Outside of the Center, older Japanese people I spoke with cultivated aging selves through exploring the new relationships, rituals, and play afforded by an aging self (Danely 2014, 2017; see also Kavedzija 2019; Moore 2014). They mourned parents and spouses, embarked on pilgrimages, took up new hobbies, and moved houses. Through it all, what lasted and became part of their enduring values was the ways the self rose up to meet the world, and was changed in the process.

Steven Parish (2008) describes this process of becoming as one of "possible selves," of people as they move through life and encounter "existential possibilities: what they might become; what they have to become as they enter life or clash with existence; as well as what they desire to be or not to be" (2008, x). Instead of consolidating and defending an essential, unchanging self-identity across the life course, a perspective of possible selves considers the ways selves might be reorganized or made anew by mobilizing feelings, imagination, and relationships. Aging, as the process of inhabiting change over time, then, is the work of developing and shedding what Parish calls, "the sensitive membranes of feeling and attitude that join us to the world" (2008, 6), to find possibility, even freedom, not in the abstraction of age, but in its lived capacities. This urges us to question, can a self that finds no meaning in old age meet itself in the conditions of later life?

Outside of the Elder Welfare Center I kept walking alongside my interlocutors. They talked about the changes in the facades of the buildings we passed and the shifting timing of flower blooms marking the start of new seasons. Maturity made these changes not only more accessible, but more deeply rooted in their self-reflection. They opened up about their past, the choices they might have made, their regrets. They turned these reflections over, back and forth like a hot potato that was only comfortable if kept in motion in your palms. Why did these pasts at times still sting, while at other moments my interlocutors seemed to discard them easily as unimportant?

Others talked about the future, not in terms of personal fitness or professional achievements, but as a project to extend the capacity of the self within the potentialities of the world by placing it in a lasting legacy carried on by others. One older man, for example, devoted his time to the preservation of a local festival, which depended on the transmission of customs to younger generations, but which was at risk of disappearing because new families in the neighborhood were smaller and had less personal

connection to the area (Danely 2014, 96-101). For this man, the festival was a project of hope, not for the ageless self, but for the continuation of a meaningful older self, whose legacy would continue to enliven the world long after individual identities had faded from memory. In these projects, we might see possible selves, deeply engaged with pasts and futures, relationships, bodies, spirits. As one older woman put it to me, they were the very "heart of aging" (Danely 2014, 185), the sublime beauty of change, transience and yielding.

Possible selves offer a way to examine older age as a potential source of meaning in later life, not necessarily as a social role that one occupies, but as an "existential situation" as Ursula K. LeGuin (2017, 13) puts it, without reliance on the normative categories based on chronological age, stages, or prescriptive social roles like those that clashed with Kaufman's informants' sense of self. In attending to the capacities of possible selves that arise or are denied in later life, we break free from both conventional notions of age and self, and open to their multiple fluctuating configurations.

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