

# Positive Emotion, Engagement and Meaning of Life of the Elderly in *Pesantren* (Islamic Boarding School)

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## ABSTRACT

Successful aging has been the focus of researcher on elderly since it has been believed that the terminal objective of every human is being a happy and healthy elderly. The aim of the study was to obtain an overview of positive emotion, engagement and meaning of life in the elderly who live as student/santri in Islamic Boarding School. The research was a qualitative method. Techniques to collect data were observation and interview. Variables in the research are positive emotion, engagement and meaning of life. Population of subject was 31 elderly, both male and female. Samples were chosen based on purpose sampling method which consisted of eight elderlies having following criteria: living in Payaman Islamic Boarding School, Magelang, above 60 years old, and healthy (not suffering from any acute nor chronic diseases). Data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis (IPA). The research shows that social support, gratitude, autonomy and inner peace are the main themes of positive emotion. Engagement, orientation, role of kyai/nyai, and competition in worship are the main themes of engagement. Optimism, self-esteem, self-existence, and akhirah-oriented life are the main themes of meaning of life. Elderly in pesantren has developed positive emotions where they feel comfortable and close to the administrators of pesantren and fellow santri, and fully engaged to activities in pesantren. The more they attached to life in pesantren; they obtained deeper meaning of life. It can be concluded that positive emotion and engagement that were continuously established in pesantren has developed the meaning of life in elderly.

**Keywords:** *Positive Emotion; Engagement; Meaning of Life; Elderly; Islamic Boarding School*

## INTRODUCTION

Getting old is a fate when human has the chance to live long. Entering the phase of getting old, individuals have to be ready to face any changes in their body. Physical, cognitive, social, and psychological degenerations are certain, yet all aspects are related to their lifestyle. In the life of the elderly, the phenomenon of losing a partner is considered normal, especially since the death of a spouse. Whereas mental illness can occur, such as depression, because there are many changes experienced by the elderly, such as feeling lonely due to losing a partner, peers, lack of attention from children,

social isolation, stress due to illness, and retirement<sup>1</sup>. Based on the statement, successful aging has been the focus of researcher on elderly since it has been believed that the terminal objective of every human is being a happy and healthy elderly.

A research based on grounded theoretical framework and supported by interview to 23 elderlies aged 62-88 years old was conducted in Zapopan, Mexico. The aim of that research was to explore the perspective of Mexican adults on successful aging. The result shows that successful aging is a multidimensional concept, which is affected by intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Overall, the definition of successful aging is acceptance and adaptation to transitions and living conditions, strong engagement with family and friends, faith to God, achievement of personal goals, and growing old in one's residence<sup>2</sup>. In addition, high resilience is required by the elderly because the result of this study is significantly correlated to positive results, namely successful aging, lower rate of depression, and long life<sup>3</sup>.

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Elderly is categorized as non-productive group of society. When an individual has categorized into elderly group, generally, the individual had retired from the job and not all of them has earnings. In line with the growing number of elderly population in urban areas, residential areas have become important since elderly spends most of their time at home<sup>4</sup>. A qualitative research conducted on elderly in Banyumanik Housing Complex, Semarang, shows three categories of spaces, namely: micro, meso, and macro and the existing condition i.e. living alone, living with children and grandchildren, living with spouse, and living with spouse as well as children and grandchildren<sup>5</sup>. The result shows that many elderly live with their family.

In contrast, elderly living in *pesantren* (Islamic boarding houses), like in Payaman, Magelang which established in 1930, shows different issues. A research has proposed that *pesantren* has contributed to the formation of social capital, especially in form of religiosity, which also contributes to community wellbeing<sup>6</sup>. In addition to the religiosity, elderly has the opportunity to learn in boarding school. One study stated that lifelong learning for parents can improve their psychological well-being and integrate their skills to achieve a healthy and active aging or known as successful aging<sup>7</sup>.

In a research on a group of elderly, it has been explained that in living life, meaning of life has become important because it forms its subjective well-being, although stable internal resources such as optimism and pessimism affect their subjective wellbeing. On the other hand, subjective well-being has the role as one of the determinants of successful aging<sup>8</sup>. In *pesantren*, elderly are busy conducting their routines. Other research suggested that elderly will be more productive if they focus not only on physical activities but also on their meaning of life to ignite their fitness, considering their limitations on physical activities<sup>9</sup>. In their old age, individuals determine what kind of life they will live. Mentioned in the study, spiritual and meaning of life have become important factors to protect themselves from psychological pressures<sup>10</sup>.

A research stated that Moslem students claim that they are close to God and serving Him makes them have a meaningful life<sup>11</sup>. In *pesantren*, the elderly as *santri* routinely conduct activities of worship, and according to the survey, they have inner peace and comfort because they perform worship freely, without any other activities like when they were not in *pesantren*. As they live in

*pesantren*, they have more experiences that cultivate positive emotions. A study related to emotional aging, such as emotional experiences, emotional regulation, emotional perceptions, emotion-related concerns, and memory, is performed on a group of people of all ages. The result of the research emphasizes multidirectional differences of the final development of life in functional domain. Furthermore, it is important to understand the emotional state of the elderly because it is related to the physical condition and welfare of the elderly<sup>12</sup>.

From a study conducted on elderly individuals in Indonesia and Japan, it shows that what is important for living condition supporting elderly life is security, comfort, health, affordability, independence, and close relationships with the social environment<sup>5</sup>. Elderly living in *pesantren* raise intense ties with other elderly who also live in *pesantren*. Those *santries* live harmoniously, helping each other and sharing stories. This positive stimulation can grow positive emotion in elderly in *pesantren*. The research was conducted on a group of subjects to compare attention bias of 35 subjects of elderly and 35 subjects of middle adult. The stimuli used are expressive faces that feature expressions such as neutral, disgust, fear, and happiness. Compared to younger subjects, the elderly pay more attention to happy faces and tend to avoid frightening faces. These findings confirm that positive stimulus effects, such as a pleasant social environment, can develop positive emotions in the elderly<sup>13</sup>. Positive emotions also develop elderly health and wellbeing<sup>14</sup>.

According to the results of the initial survey, elderly in *pesantren* receive social support from fellow elderly, as well as the board and the kyai of the *pesantren*. Social relations in *pesantren* and the comfort felt by elderly *santri* in *pesantren* stimulate elderly attachment to the life in *pesantren*. From the results of a research, it shows that individuals who attach to an environment will be much involved and learn from the environment, so that individuals will be more creative and able to solve problems independently, meaning that those individuals are more mentally healthy<sup>15</sup>. Another study on group of elderly and people with disability discovered that social participation, attention to them in a social network, form an established and important social bond in fostering their well-being<sup>16</sup>. Social support from significant other is very important for the elderly since it can develop elderly psychological wellbeing<sup>17</sup>.

Positive Psychology is progressing from time to time. The main purpose of positive psychology is to discover our potentials, which will support our productivity. The following constructs: establishing positive emotion, building engagement in an environment, and building meaning of life are parts of positive psychology, have become important especially for the elderly. The aim of the study was to obtain an overview of positive emotion, engagement and meaning of life in the elderly who live as *santri* in Islamic Boarding School.

## METHOD

The research was a qualitative research. Techniques to collect data were observation and interview. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted to select samples based on purposive sampling method, which consisted of eight elderly having following criteria: living in Payaman Islamic Boarding School, Magelang, above 60 years old, and healthy (not suffering from any acute nor chronic diseases). Data were analyzed using *Interpretative Phenomenology Analysis* (IPA) to observe how participants construe their personal and social life as well as to explore their experiences. IPA emphasized on construing from the points of view from both participants and researchers.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

**Result:** The following table presents subjects' social-demographic data.

**Table 1: Social-Demographic Data of Subjects (n = 8)**

Subject	Sex	Age	Status of Spouse	Occupation	Length of Stay in <i>Pesantren</i> (Year)	Origin
1	F	65	Passed Away	Entrepreneur	3	Ambarawa
2	F	66	Alive	Homemaker	2	Batang
3	M	78	Alive	Government employee	2	Kebumen
4	M	75	Alive	Entrepreneur	2	Pekalongan
5	F	69	Alive	Homemaker	3	Demak
6	M	76	Alive	Teacher	5	Slawi
7	M	68	Alive	Employee of Finance Dept.	1	Jakarta
8	F	62	Passed Away	Trader	4	Temanggung

The following table presents some main themes from the constructs, which were obtained from interview.

**Table 2: Main Themes from Data of Subjects (n = 8)**

Variable	Main Theme
<b>Positive Emotion</b>	Social supports from others Motivation and thankfulness Autonomy and conducting a healthy life Inner peace
<b>Engagement</b>	Engagement to activities in Islamic Boarding School Orientation of living in Pondok Sepuh The roles of <i>Kyai &amp; Nyai</i> Strive in worship
<b>Meaning of Life</b>	Positive expectancies toward the future Efforts to prove personal existence Self-esteem Orientation to akhirah

## DISCUSSIONS

Elderly living in *pesantren* have to do challenging daily routines. *Pesantren* is an institution to learn more about Islam. Generally, the students of *pesantren*, or *santri*, consist of children and teenagers. *Pesantren* Payaman Magelang has elderly *santris*, which is unique since elderly are usually reluctant to study and attach to rules of conduct. Elderly also selectively chose their social environment, including living in *pesantren*<sup>18</sup>. This qualitative research involved 4 female elderly and 4 male elderly coming from various jobs and origins. They joined *pesantren* and live a life accompanied by worship routines. The feeling of togetherness has developed positive emotions. From the interview, several main themes were obtained, such as social supports, thankfulness, autonomy and inner peace. In *pesantren*, elderly get social support either from fellow *santri* or from *ustad* and *kyai*. Such support appears as information and religious knowledge, togetherness to share stories, and attention and assistance provided in daily activities.

When positive emotion is formed, spirituality in elderly will also improve<sup>19</sup>. Elderly experience degeneration in various aspects, both physical and psychological, including lower emotional ability like emotional control. Elderly have challenges to control his anger, get sad easily and cry for some life events, and it lasts for a period. So studying this aspect of emotional aging is important to be developed<sup>12</sup>.

The elderly at *pesantren* revealed that they became passionate in living and worshiping. They are thankful because at that age, they are still given the health, strength and opportunity to undergo *pesantren* activities, study and worship. In addition, they formed a healthy lifestyle and self-reliance in *pesantren*, such as being responsible for their needs of clothing and food, and even cleaning the area of boarding schools together with other elderly.

In *pesantren*, the elderly formed inner peace and positive emotion. These aspects are considered the most important aspects, which appear in all subjects. A theory stated that sleep mechanisms plays an important role in the process of emotional regulation<sup>20</sup>. This is evident that one of the evidence of inner peace is that the elderly can sleep soundly every day and their health conditions are maintained. Another research stated that maintaining positive emotion increases elderly's mental and physical health<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, a research shows that positive emotions is beneficial to reduce, even cure dementia<sup>22</sup>.

The interview revealed that the elderly are happy to be involved in all activities in the *pesantren*, which formed a full engagement of the elderly. The main theme of engagement can be established, that is full involvement, orientation, role of kyai/nyai, and competition in worship. One of the respondents mentioned that he got an additional task in *pesantren*, and it actually formed a positive feeling: needed by his environment. A research mentioned that elderly engagement in productive activities leads to elderly wellbeing<sup>23</sup>. Another study on 2750 elderly respondents mentioned that there were variations of elderly engagement in rural areas. Most of the elderly were reluctant to be actively involved in their environment, unless the engagement were established from local attractions and social supports<sup>24</sup>. In another study mentioned that to survive living in a place of life, elderly needs adequate facilities and social support, to foster elderly social wellbeing<sup>25</sup>. This is contrary to the results of this study, where *pesantren* research

sites have limited facilities, and the reason why the elderly are willing to be fully involved in all *pesantren* activities and to stay in *pesantren* for many years was interpersonal closeness with fellow *santri* and kyai/nyai of the *pesantren*.

A study in China to 14.507 elderly respondents from 393 areas suggests that one of the factors establishing elderly engagement to their environment is social concern to the elderly<sup>26</sup>. Supportive environment condition to do religious activities has stimulated elderly *santri* to compete in worship. The serenity to do worship and increased quality of faith has developed engagement to *pesantren*.

In terms of construing life by elderly in *pesantren*, there are several main themes as the result of the interview, namely, optimism, proving self-existence, self-esteem, and akhirah-oriented life. A research conducted to elderly suffering from cancer suggested eight values of life forming one's meaning of life, namely: comfort, sustainability, humility, dignity, honesty, optimism, hope, and readiness<sup>27</sup>. The result is in line with the findings of the research on elderly in *pesantren*, that optimism develops meaning of life in elderly. Self-esteem and self-existence formed in the elderly is a manifestation of self-dignity, as one of the values of life. Finally, akhirah-oriented life that appears on all respondents indicated that elderly *santri* is emphasized on the increased quality of worship and their faith as the meaning of their life

Being healthy, optimistic and needed by others develop spiritual conditions of individuals and their meaning of life, and in turns, increase individual's quality of life<sup>10</sup>. Elderly subjects in *pesantren* are not prone to chronic and acute diseases because of the meaning of positive life have stimulated their quality of life. The results of the study on elderly suffering from depression shows that the elderly who have hope and meaning of life can minimize the depression<sup>28</sup>

Elderly need an activity and appreciation from the environment to avoid depression. The environment can come from a family or nursing home or *pesantren*<sup>29</sup>. Elderly experience positive emotions in the form of gratitude and inner peace while in the *pesantren*. Furthermore, positive emotions can motivate elderly to engage in *pesantren* activities in *pesantren* including building emotional attachment to fellow elderly *santri* and kyai/nyai, thus creating an environment of competing

in worship. Positive emotions and engagement, which are maintained by the elderly when in boarding school, can develop life optimism, prove personal existence and self-esteem and live an akhirah-oriented life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The elderly living in Islamic Boarding School has gained many experiences to develop positive emotions as well as motivate them to engage in every activity in the boarding school. Their positive emotion and engagement lead to meaning of life in elderly.

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**Ethical Clearance:** Authors used informed consent for subject samples.

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