Successful Aging for Women

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INTRODUCTION

We are no longer concerned just with living through our third decade but with how we are living through our sixth, seventh, and eighth. For many of us, physical survival is no longer the primary issue and attention has turned to the quality and nature of that survival, to patterns of development, and to what comprises successful aging. To be concerned with such issues is a luxury as there are still many in day's world for whom "successful aging" continues to mean physical survival. Certainly, physical growth and health also are of concern today in North America, especially as we become more cognizant of the interactive process of aging; but in addition, social scientists study and describe aging in psychological, and increasingly psycho-social and sociological terms.

Theories of adult life and development tell us that aging is a series of stages or a sequence of differing issues, preoccupations, and perspectives. These theories present a picture of aging which comes to be associated with successful or positive aging; but is this picture of successful aging applicable (and accessible) to all, and if not, why not? Understanding this is crucial for leisure research. While inquiry and discourse on the contribution of leisure to development and successful aging abounds (Kleiber and Kelly, 1980; Loy and Ingham, 1982; Kleiber and Kane, 1984; Osgood and Howe, 1984; Riddick and Daniels, 1984; Glancy, et al., 1986; Freysinger, 1987,1990; Kelly, 1986; Kleiber, 1985; Palmore, 1979; Havighurst, 1957; Csikszentmihalyi, 1981), we have not stopped to consider the adequacy of developmental theory and the extent to which it may be perpetuating not only inaccurate but also limited and oppressive views of aging.

The purpose of this paper addresses three questions:

1. What is successful aging?
2. What are the biases/limitations of these concepts in relation to women? And
3. What are the implications of the above for developmental leisure research?

The intent of this paper is to raise questions more than answer them. It is being presented to stimulate discussion and help me develop my own thoughts. My academic background and research interests lie in the areas of leisure, lifespan development, and gender. Until the last couple years I was happy with what developmental theory provided me in studying leisure. However, I have become increasingly concerned about the validity and generalizability of adult developmental theory and thus my own research which utilizes this perspective in looking at leisure behaviour. It is these concerns that I present in this paper. I might add that my concerns are also shared by others. At the recent annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, an afternoon was devoted to the discussion of the adequacy of prevailing models of aging for women, people of colour, the working class, and the poor. However, I want to go beyond the issue of whether these models are adequate and also discuss the meaning of this inadequacy for individuals and society.

WHAT IS SUCCESSFUL AGING?

In looking at the literature, it seems that successful or positive aging or development in adulthood has been discussed and explored in at least two general ways. First, successful aging has been equated with life satisfaction. The higher one's satisfaction with life, the more successfully he or she is aging. According to Ryff (1982), the Kansas City Studies of Adult Life (Williams and Wirth, 1965) were the first systematic empirical studies of life satisfaction across
adulthood. Since then, other similar notions of positive aging have included such dimensions as happiness, morale, adjustment, and subjective well-being (Ryff, 1986). A variety of factors have been examined as predictors of these states, such as age, socio-economic status, health, activity and social interaction, marital status, race, employment, and residence (Palmore, 1979).

Another concept of successful aging defines it in relation to theories of adult psychosocial development or personal growth. The work of Jung (1933), Buhler (1935), Buhler and Massarik (1968), Erikson (1959), Neugarten (1968, 1977), Maslow (1968), and Rogers (1961) has served to define what aging is and should be. The work of all these individuals, and Erikson in particular, is the basis of more recent research on adult life and development (e.g. Levinson, 1977; Vaillant, 1977; Sheehy, 1976; Gould, 1978; Ryff, 1982, 1985). Most of this work defines adulthood as a sequence of age-related stages in which various psychosocial concerns or preoccupations come to the fore and must be resolved before one can successfully move on (grow/develop) to the next. Development is seen to be a process of interaction between the biological/psychological individual and her/his socio-cultural environment. Hence, successful aging would be seen as the progressive resolution or meeting of the psychosocial conflict or task of each stage.

Seeing a number of similarities among the various theories of adult development, Ryff (1986) has synthesized them in an effort to develop an integrated model of successful aging. This model is composed of six components or psychosocial issues. According to Ryff, successful aging is defined by self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. These dimensions of positive aging are briefly described.

### Table 1
Definitions of Dimensions of Well-Being

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Self-acceptance</td>
<td>Possesses a positive attitude toward the self; acknowledges and accepts multiple aspects of self-including good and bad qualities; feels positive about past life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive relations</td>
<td>Has warm, satisfying, trusting relations with others; is concerned about the welfare of others; capable of strong empathy, affection and intimacy; understands gives and take of human relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Is self-determining and independent; able to resist social pressures to think and act in certain ways; regulates behaviour from within; evaluates self by personal standards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental mastery</td>
<td>Has a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment; controls complex array of external activities; makes effective use of surrounding opportunities; able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose in life</td>
<td>Has goals in life and a sense of directedness; feels there is meaning to present and past life; has a unifying outlook that gives life purpose; has aims and objectives for living.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth</td>
<td>Has a feeling of continued development; sees self as growing and expanding; is open to new experiences; has sense of realizing one’s potential; sees improvement in self-behaviour over time; is changing in ways that reflect more self-knowledge and effectiveness.</td>
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* Adapted from Table 1 in Ryff (1986)
in Table 1. To compare it to the parent theories, Erikson's stages of intimacy and
generativity, for example, can be seen in what Ryff calls "positive relations with others";
Erikson's final stage of integrity in the stage "self-acceptance." (A complete discussion of these
components in relation to previous theory can be found in Ryff, 1986.)

Life satisfaction, adjustment, morale, or a series of psychosocial tasks or issues -- these are how
theory defines successful aging. The adequacy and biases of such definitions are discussed next.

WHAT ARE THE BIASES/LIMITATIONS?

The discussion begins with an examination of the adequacy of theories of adult development for
women. Three limitations in particular are discussed. The meaning/impact of these for individuals
and society are then addressed. These criticisms apply to both individual theories and Ryff's
integrated model of successful aging as it is based on these individual theories.

1. **Cohort Particularity:** Most of what we know about adult development is based on studies
   of people born between the early 1920s and the early 1930s (e.g. the work of Elder, 1979;
   Levinson, 1978; Rubin, 1979; Vaillant, 1977), people who experienced the Depression,
   WWII, and tremendous economic growth in this country (Rossi, 1980). Women of this
generation typically had married and begun childbearing by their early twenties. Many settled in
suburbia and lived a life of domesticity because of the United States affluence. They had large
families with children spaced close together. Because of this, and changing economic conditions,
many then, in middle adulthood, had to seek paid employment to help support their adolescent
and college-bound children. Thus, according to Rossi, we might expect more recent cohorts of
women, who grew up facing a different set of timing and roles and different social expectations,
to experience and define development differently.

2. **Race and Class:** Much of what we know about adult development is also limited by race
   (predominantly white) and education/class (highly educated, middle to upper middle
   class) (e.g. the research of Baruch, Barnett and Rivers, 1983; Gilligan, 1982; Gould,
   1978; Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977). As shown in the work of Rubin (1976) and
   Komarovsky (1967), and suggested by Jackson (1989) and Ryff (1986), class and race
distinguish the life experience of both women and men. Further, Lorde (1980) contends
that one’s experience as a woman cannot be separated from either of these issues.

3. **Sex:** In terms of women in general, many theorists, investigators, and participants in the
   previously mentioned research were men; hence, the applicability of these theories to
   women has been questioned. (Ryff, 1968). Barnett and Baruch (1978) have argued that
   the work of both Levinson and Erikson—does not fit the experience of women. In their
   research, they found that women’s lives involved varying role patterns not so centrally
tied to chronological age. Gilligan (1982a) has argued that in contrast with Erikson’s
sequence of (men’s) development, women’s sequence is one of intimacy, individuation,
and generativity not individuation, intimacy and generativity (see also Steward, 1976).
Further, while male development is permeated by issues of autonomy, separation, and
individuation, women’s development is more closely tied to human relationships and
issues of attachment and intimacy.

While recognition of the inadequacies of research on successful aging is growing, rarely have
the conceptions been analyzed in terms of their meaning for women and society as a whole. My
concern is that while presented as objective, neutral science, in actuality these theories and their
acknowledged inadequacies are political. They circumscribe what is normal, acceptable (as well
as deviant and unacceptable) aging and in doing so serve to support existing structures,
institutions, and relationships of power and privilege within society. The theories (and theorists) do
this by focusing on the individual and individual agency and by not analyzing the way in which
some individuals (e.g. white, middle-class males) may systematically (though I'm not saying
consciously) be "allowed" more agency than others. Development and aging is seen as a natural,
neutral process that occurs and resides within the individual, but that is not the only place it resides. Development and successful aging are also socially constructed (Clarke and Critcher, 1985) by a culture at a particular point in time; and while a standard of successful aging is constructed, the way aging is actually experienced varies by sex, race, and class.

For example, beginning in the 1960s successful aging was equated with high life satisfaction, morale, and adjustment. While such factors do not explain a lot of the variance, socio-economic status, health, marital status, and social integration/activity, for example, are positively related to life satisfaction. Those who are widowed/divorced or single, with poor health, little social interaction, and lower incomes are less likely to be satisfied; that is, to be aging successfully. When results such as these are not interpreted in their socio-political context, it is easy to just blame the victim; to believe that somehow if women would just be willing to increase their participation in social activities and learn to cope with widowhood/divorce, they would be more satisfied. This ignores at least two things: (1) society makes being a single woman, whether by choice, widowhood, or divorce, a liability and stigma, and (2) to expect individuals to be highly satisfied with low income, poor health, and little social interaction defies common sense. In fact, perhaps dissatisfaction with life in such a situation is an indication of a very well-adjusted and sensible individual. Perhaps also it is an act of "political resistance" (cf. Donnelly, 1988), hence, a condition society is dissatisfied with because it is evidence of systematic social inequalities and injustices.

Similarly, in adulthood and especially in the public spheres of life, our society (and economic system) requires autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose, and personal growth. Not incidentally, research has shown that these are qualities that have defined men's development, while women's development, as stated previously, has been more focused around issues of intimacy, caring, and relationships with others. As has been discussed elsewhere (Gilligan, 1982a), U.S. culture values the "masculine-defined" dimensions more. Hence, it is an act-of-courage and defiance to be accepting of self when the culture in which you live devalues you because of your sex or race, class, and/or age. Again, is not accepting self an act of political resistance?

**IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENTAL LEISURE RESEARCH**

My argument is that our definitions of successful aging and development are both inadequate and value-laden. That is, happiness and life satisfaction or autonomy, self-acceptance and environmental mastery as dimensions of successful aging are based on theories limited by the exclusivity of the samples upon which they were formulated. Furthermore, these definitions often focus on aging as a process occurring within the individual and thus subject to individual agency. What is ignored is the social construction of aging and the differential social experience of aging based on gender, race, and/or class. Yet these standards set the criteria for what is normal and abnormal, acceptable, and deviant.

There are a number of implications for developmental leisure research. For example, in our research we explore the ways in which leisure involvements may lead to successful aging as defined by these theories. Perhaps we also should be looking at how expressions of leisure are a way that individuals survive in spite of, as well as resist, such ideals and hence, their oppression.

**REFERENCES**


Leisure Challenges: Bringing People, Resources and Policy into Play

Les défis des loisirs: agencer les personnes, les resources, et les decisions

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