Successful Aging: A Developmental Approach

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Like goodness, truth, and other human ideals, successful aging may appeal more than it illuminates. It is an image that attracts human interest but defies easy or consensual definition. As growing numbers of people anticipate a long old age, the meaning of successful aging takes on even greater importance. Formulations of the concept become standards by which individuals evaluate themselves and others, as well as visions toward which to strive. In attempting to advance understanding of how these years might be fully experienced, this article examines previous perspectives on successful aging and presents a new alternative. The aim is to illustrate how a developmental orientation adds new challenges and dimensions to the task of growing old successfully.

Previous Approaches to Successful Aging

Four dimensions of successful aging were proposed in the Kansas City Studies of Adult Life: the amount of activity in which the individual engaged, the ability to disengage, satisfaction with life, and maturity or integration of personality. Williams and Wirths (1965) later derived two additional views of successful aging: a balanced exchange of energy between the individual and the social system, and a stable social system. Of these various formulations, life satisfaction became the most frequently investigated dimension of successful aging. Life satisfaction included the components of zest versus apathy, resolution and fortitude, relationships between desired goals and achieved goals, self-concept, and mood tone (Neugarten, Havighurst, & Tobin, 1961). A vast body of gerontological research was generated by this early formulation, so much so that life satisfaction has been described as the most widely studied variable in the field of aging (Maddox & Wiley, 1976). The abundance of empirical work elaborated and differentiated the concept of life satisfaction far beyond its initial definition. Thus, in addition to the original dimensions, successful aging has been investigated in terms of happiness, adjustment, morale, health, survival, subjective well-being, and the balance between aspirations and achievements (Cutler, 1979; George, 1979; Larson, 1978; Palmore, 1979). These dimensions are accompanied by a multiplicity of measures and empirical findings, 30 years of which have been recently reviewed by Larson (1978). The key question integrating this wide array of work is what variable or variables best predict (correlate with) life satisfaction, happiness, morale, etc. Factors investigated as possible clues to the mystery of growing old successfully include health, socioeconomic status, age, sex, race, employment, marital status, availability of transportation, residence, activity, and social interaction (Larson, 1978; Lohman, 1977; Palmore, 1979). Among the prominent predictors are social activity, health, marital status, and socioeconomic status, although even in combination these variables leave the greatest proportion of variance in subjective well-being unexplained (Larson, 1978).

Cutler (1979), perhaps in response to this showing, has recently called for a reexamination of the life satisfaction construct, contending that it is a multidimensional rather than a unidimensional system and that the separate components must be clearly delineated. In addition, Cutler provided empirical evidence that the particular dimensions comprising life satisfaction vary across age groups.

A further variant on the topic of successful aging warranting mention is the perspective of Fozard and Popkin (1978). Focusing on intervention by way of environmental engineering and individual counseling, their objective is to optimize adults' abilities to adjust to various aging processes in vision, memory, and learning spheres, as well as to maximize individual choices in realms of work, health, and leisure. The optimization analysis presented stresses the changing interplay between the individual and the environment at different phases of the life course. Thus, in contrast to the life satisfaction orientation wherein subjective self-perceptions are paramount, this approach emphasizes the significance of environmental factors and external elements in the attainment of optimal functioning.

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When examining the above perspectives on successful aging, two notable points emerge. First, theoretical guidance in the related investigations is lacking. The research in general represents exploratory ventures wherein particular measures of well-being are correlated with various indices of context (e.g., marital status, socioeconomic status, health). A priori theoretical accounts of why certain variables are likely to be correlated with life satisfaction are missing, and obtained findings are left in a sort of explanatory ambiguity. Even the recent causal model of life satisfaction proposed by Markides and Martin (1979) was formulated more on the basis of psychometric explorations than the development of an explicit theoretical rationale. From the standpoint of environmental engineering (Fozard & Popkin, 1978), the lack of theory makes it additionally difficult to define what constitutes optimal vision, memory, or learning among older adults. Second, and most important, research on successful aging has focused largely on dependent variables that could characterize optimal functioning at any age period. Happiness, adjustment, and morale are more measures of successful living, regardless of age, than they are indicators of the unique challenges of growing old effectively. The possibility that successful aging may involve the resolution of issues separate from other age periods is intimated in Cutler's (1979) differentiation of life satisfaction according to age groups, as well as Fozard and Popkin's (1978) emphasis on the unique environmental demands and adaptive capacities at various phases of adulthood. It is also indicated by the adaptive tasks of aging formulated by Clark and Anderson (1967). These included having a perception of aging and a sense of instrumental limitations, redefining one's physical and social life space, substituting alternative sources of need satisfaction, reasessing the criteria for evaluation of self, and reintegrating values and life goals. The identification of the unique qualities of successful living in adulthood and aging, along with the concern for an interpretive theoretical framework, constitute key elements of the alternative approach to successful aging being advocated herein.

Successful Aging from a Theory-Guided Developmental Perspective

The newness of the present approach to successful aging is reflected in its joint focus on developmental processes and theoretical guidance. The developmental aspect underscores the aim of identifying the uniquely positive characteristics and challenges of adulthood and old age. That is, a developmental orientation searches for the higher, more differentiated growth processes that occur with aging rather than examining essentially nondevelopmental dimensions (e.g., life satisfaction) that could be used to investigate subjective well-being in any age period. These growth-oriented developmental changes will be pursued through application of existing theoretical models, the second major element of a new approach to successful aging. The emphasis on theory responds to a concern for a systematic approach to knowledge generation and knowledge application (Baltes & Willis, 1977). That is, theoretical guidance will advance research beyond exploratory stages into more formalized, hypothesis-testing endeavors.

Danish and D'Augelli (1980) have summarized, in a generic fashion, the characteristics of the optimization model being advocated. These include statements about desirable goals or end-states of behavior, a focus on sequential change, emphasis on techniques of optimization, consideration of the individual as an integrative biopsychosocial unit, and a view of development occurring in a changing biocultural context. Such a model of progressive growth processes will generate knowledge critical from the interventive standpoint wherein the traditional emphasis on alleviative, after-the-problem strategies is being challenged by a concern for preventive or enhancement strategies. Thus, rather than focus on the identification of conditions leading to problems, the optimization model focuses on identification of conditions that lead to growth. The aim is to help individuals encounter the future so that events become opportunities for self-enhancement. The implementation of such a model is, however, contingent on a well-grounded knowledge of adaptive functioning. The optimization, growth-oriented theories to be presented are viewed as mechanisms by which such knowledge could accumulate.

Personality, defined as the enduring dimensions or distinctive characteristics of the individual (Staub, 1980), is a useful forum for illustrating the merit of a developmental approach to successful aging. To begin with, personality does not have the built-in inevitabilities of decline characteristic of physiologically linked processes such as memory, vision, or cognition. It might even be speculated that personality is the realm compensating for loss in other spheres. Additionally, personality as a realm of study can persuasively illustrate a theory-guided approach because it possesses the necessary optimization theories. These theories have, for the most part, been neglected in the formulation of relevant research. Renewed attention to the richness of available theory and heightened commitment to refining and advancing such theory represent a major objective of the present perspective.

Revitalizing Neglected Theory

The psychosocial stage model of ego development formulated by Erikson (1959) is perhaps the most well-known exemplar of life-span developmental theory. With regard to adulthood, the primary crises for the expanding ego are the tasks of intimacy (young adulthood), generativity (middle adulthood), and integrity (old age). Empirical research has generally employed these concepts in an ex post facto fashion: They are presented in discussion sections to interpret obtained findings rather than relied on in the formation of research designs or measurement instruments. There are notable exceptions, studies in which the intent has been to operationalize the concepts themselves (Baker, 1971; Boyd & Koskela, 1970; Constantinople, 1969; Marcia, 1966; Whitbourne & Waterman, 1979), although these have focused primarily on the identity
issues of adolescence and the intimacy concerns of young adulthood.

The ego challenge of middle adulthood, generativity versus stagnation, is largely unexplored empirically. It is expressed theoretically through a concern for establishing and guiding the next generation and showing an emphasis on productivity and creativity. These theoretical ideas suggest possibilities for growth for the middle-aged individual—the opportunity to move beyond the self-directed concerns of identity or the interpersonal dimensions of intimacy into a phase wherein one's skill and knowledge are shared with younger individuals and one assumes leadership and decision-making roles.

The final stage of ego development, integrity versus despair, is perhaps the most enticing and elusive of all stages. Many aspects of integrity have been identified by Erikson (1959): emotional integration, accepting one's life cycle as something that had to be, feeling a comradeship with the ways of distant times, having adapted oneself to the triumphs and disappointments of being, possessing a love of humankind rather than self, and finally, achieving a spiritual sense that eliminates the fear of death. Surely one who evidences these qualities would be deemed to have aged successfully. More important is the possibility that these achievements are distinct to old age and are intrinsic to reaching the end of a long life. As expressed by Jung (1933):

A human being would certainly not grow to be seventy or eighty years old if this longevity had no meaning for the species to which he belonged. The afternoon of human life must also have a significance of its own and cannot be merely a pitiful appendage to life's morning (p. 109).

Thus, whether manifest through ego integrity or Jung's concept of self-illumination, the unique significance of old age emerges and the unique growth processes are further identified.

Neugarten (1968, 1973), through a combination of theoretical and empirical endeavors, has also clarified the specific personality challenges of middle and old age. With regard to the former, she has formulated the "executive processes" of middle age: self-awareness, selectivity, manipulation and control of the environment, mastery, and competence. She has described the "incredible complexity" shown in the behavior of the middle-aged business executive who manages and schedules a demanding professional life, differentiates between responsibilities to be delegated to others and those to be completed by oneself, and further manages to satisfy a multiplicity of emotional, sexual, and aesthetic needs. In contrast to the 47 year old's view of the environment as rewarding risk-taking and boldness, Neugarten described the 60 year old as being more conforming and accommodative to outer-world demands. This inward turning of ego functions, known as the process of interiority, represents a key personality issue of old age. It is perhaps through such inward turning that one manages to achieve the emotional integration described by Erikson. The above processes, further described as the active-to-passive mastery sequence and the change from an outer-world to an inner-world orientation (Gutmann, 1964; Neugarten, 1968), provide additional clarity to the unique personality demands of middle and late adulthood.

Perhaps least attended to among available optimization theories is Buhler's (Buhler, 1935; Buhler & Massarik, 1968) formulation of the basic life tendencies that work toward the fulfillment of life. Buhler, in response to the pervasive Freudian view of the 1930's, asserted that homeostasis was not a goal in itself but merely a favorable condition of functioning. She stated that the organism's goal was to be active and productive in a reality that allowed for accomplishments. Thus, Buhler proposed need satisfaction, self-limiting adaptation, creative expansion, and upholding internal order as basic life tendencies.

Their implicit ultimate intent is self-development, the establishment of contacts, the mastering of reality, the fulfillment of life through integrated actualization of the individual's potentials (Buhler & Massarik, 1968, p. 923).

Need satisfaction (the pursuit of tension-reducing satisfiers) and self-limiting adaptation (adapting one's behavior to that of others in order to belong and participate) are the prominent tendencies or goals of infancy and later childhood. Creative expansion, the eminent tendency of adulthood, refers to goals of advancing in the world and changing it creatively through physical or mental activities. It stresses leadership, influence, productivity, and even aggressive behavior. Upholding internal order, the most complex of the basic life tendencies prevails during the climacteric age (a phrase used symbolically by Buhler to refer to the lengthy period of time following reproductive capacity). This tendency comprises different ordering principles that work toward the unity of personality and behavior. In later life such principles are found in the integrating operations of goals, ideals, and self-assessments. In combination, Buhler's life tendencies of adulthood and old age hold merit for the investigation of successful aging. They both highlight the unique challenges of various life periods and provide guidelines as to the type of behaviors that will evidence successful resolution of the challenge.

When viewed in concert, the above works warrant three summary points. First, there is no single form of successful development whether in middle or old age. The theories reflect a multiplicity of characteristics by which one might be deemed as developing optimally. Hence, the dilemma of value judgments inherent in defining successful aging is mitigated by the variety of behaviors reflective of growth. Second, although the present treatment has stressed the positive, bright side of change, it is relevant to note that many of the above theorists provided telling descriptions of what might be considered unsuccessful aging. These are further helpful in differentiating the concept of optimal development and useful in identifying impediments to its attainment. Finally, it must be acknowledged that the theoretical ideas proffered exist in crude form; they are a blend of enticing words that for the most part lack explicit formulations or interlocking statements of laws. They are, in short, prototheories (Baltes & Willis, 1977) and represent the mere beginnings of
explains the starting points are sufficiently rich to
merit efforts toward theoretical clarification, refine-
ment, and extension.

Explaining the Theoretical Neglect

The rich dimensions suggested by the above theo-
retical formulations have not had a broad impact on
personality research in adulthood and old age. One
explanation for the neglect stems from the failure to
operationalize the proposed constructs. Ego integrity
has appealed to the interests of many gerontological
researchers, but few have attempted to translate its
meaning to strategies of empirical investigation. An
additional and more current reason for inattention to
these developmental formulations is related to broad-
ranging attacks on stage theory. Criticisms of stage
theory have occurred within cognitive (Labouvie-Vief
& Chandler, 1978) and life-span developmental
domains (Baltes, 1979; Brim & Kagan, 1980). Stage theory,
having its origin in biological growth models of de-
velopment, is seen as representing an inflexible for-
mulation, one requiring developmental progressions
that are unidirectional, irreversible, hierarchical, invar-
ant, and universal. Such rigid models have been soundly
derided for ignoring a multiplicity of influ-
ences surrounding development including cohort ef-
facts, situational variability, cultural diversity, and in-
dividual differences.

In order that existing stage theories of adult person-
ality development be meaningfully revitalized, the
above criticisms must be addressed. With regard to
inflexible developmental models, it is important to
recognize that biological-growth-oriented models rep-
resent but one approach to stage theory. Loevinger's
(1966, 1976) theory of ego development, for example,
does not advocate universality but rather that, if de-
velopment does occur, it will follow certain directions.
Similarly, Emmerich (1968), in his insightful discussion
of the structural aspects of personality development,
clarified Erikson's theory as combining classical devel-
opmental orientation (read stage theory) with differ-
ential analysis, which considers how in the course of
development individuals become sorted into differ-
entiated subgroups. That is, Erikson's psychosocial
crises emerge in a fixed developmental order although
the resolution of each crisis is conceptualized in bi-
polar terms representing differing outcomes and
thereby incorporating individual differences within
the model. Runyan (1980) has also outlined a model
that offers the possibility of tracing different individual
pathways through a sequence of common stages. With
regard to hierarchical aspects of stage theory, Emmer-
ich further distinguished between varying perspec-
tives, from the most radical case in which higher levels
displace lower levels of development to the more
flexible form in which highest levels displace lower
levels, but the latter remain latent and reemerge if
circumstances warrant. Emmerich concluded that
"personality research has not yet clarified which of
these alternatives is most applicable" (p. 647).

Hence, the rigid inflexibility of classical stage theory
is not an appropriate characterization of a stage ap-
proach within the personality domain. Available the-
ories capitalize on the positive aspects of stage theory
by formulating optimal development, but they do so
without the straitjacket imposed by biological growth
models. Parenthetically, it is worth noting that stage
theories of personality development have always been
more attentive to the unique issues of adulthood and
aging than stage theories in other domains such as
cognitive development in which final developmental
changes were postulated to occur in adolescence (Pi-
aget, 1970). Generativity, integrity, interiority, creative
expansion, and inner order were all formulated to
capture the unique aspects of adulthood and aging.
Personality theories have, in sum, embodied the best
of life-span thinking by formulating new opportunities
for growth and development at all phases of life.

Beyond Surface Appeal

The task of revitalizing interest in optimization the-
ories of adult personality development is not one of
making a persuasive case on a verbal level—the related
theories have long held sufficient surface appeal. The
real test is to translate these theoretical constructs to
research strategies so as to enable empirical advance-
ment. Thus far, the clinical domain has made the most
strides in this direction as illustrated by the works of
These applications have been largely idiographic, re-
flecting clinical case studies, and have focused pri-
arily on young adult and middle-aged men. With
regard to the growth processes of old age, there is a
beginning of empirical work. Boylin et al. (1976) ex-
amined the relationship between reminiscence and
ego integrity in institutionalized men. Subscales for
the last three of Erikson's stages were developed in the
study although reliability and validity assessments
were not made. Also focused on ego integrity is the
research of Walaskay and Whitbourne (1980). Work-
ing with community-dwelling men and women and
using semistructured interviews, they have investi-
gated variations in the process of resolving ego integ-
urity. Four integrity statuses have been formulated:
integrity achieving, dissonant (in crisis), foreclosed
(avoiding crisis), and despairing. These statuses have,
in turn, been related to reminiscence activity, death
attitudes and preparation, psychological well-being,
and the last three of Erikson's stages with preliminary
evidence of construct validity.

Personality development in the transition from mid-
dle age to old age has been examined in the research
of Ryff. A first study (Ryff & Baltes, 1976) attempted to
operationalize the shift from the "executive processes"
of middle age to the inwardness of old age, using a
distinction between instrumental and terminal values
(Rokeach, 1973). Data from a sample of middle-aged
and old-aged women supported the prediction of an
emphasis on instrumental values in middle age and a
preference for terminal values in old age. Ryff (1982)
replicated this finding and extended the investigation
to include personality dimensions. A distinction was
made between developmental dimensions of person-
ality (i.e., those predicted to show perceived change) and nondevelopmental dimensions (i.e., those predicted to show perceived stability). The former were selected to parallel many of the previously described theoretical processes. Findings from a sample of middle-aged and old-aged men and women supported perceived change on the developmental dimensions for middle-aged men and perceived stability for the entire sample. As both of the above studies were conducted with measures that only approximated the theoretical processes of interest, Ryff and Heinicke (1981) constructed personality scales to measure the specific dimensions of generativity, integrity, complexity (drawn from Neugarten's executive processes perspective), and interiority. The scales were developed using structured assessment procedures, and the findings on a sample of 240 young adult, middle-aged, and old-aged men and women revealed the predicted emphasis on generativity in middle age, integrity in old age, and partial support for interiority as a prominent aspect of self-perception in old age.

Research on successful aging will be advanced by attentiveness to conceptualizations of new dimensions of growth in adulthood and aging. Whereas the present perspective relied largely on developmental theories, it is possible that insight will be gained from the clinical literature. Allport (1961), for example, has written extensively on maturity as a characteristic of adulthood. Numerous aspects of maturity are defined including emotional security, warm relating to others, an extension of self, realistic perception, and a unifying philosophy of life. Roger's fully functioning person (Rogers & Dymond, 1954) also reflects a concern with the psychological growth of the individual. Defining features include self-direction, allowing oneself to be complex in feelings and viewpoints, openness to experience, trusting oneself, and accepting the values and experiences of other persons. It is interesting to note that openness to experience has been investigated as a personality dimension in adulthood and aging (McCrae & Costa, 1980). Age trends have been documented in this dimension, and it has been linked to measures of ego development. Finally, Maslow's (1971) characteristics of self-actualizing people might also provide direction for formulating growth processes in the second half of life. Lengthy descriptions of the characteristics of self-actualized individuals have been provided. From the present perspective, the issue is whether these characteristics show developmental features. That is, does the process of self-actualization (or becoming fully functioning, or reaching maturity) relate to one's stage in life and one's previous life experiences?

Empirical research following from these views of the growing person would do well to include a concern for individual differences. For example, variation in the patterning and timing of growth processes may occur as a function of sex, educational level, or ethnicity. Sensitivity to historical and cultural variation in the behaviors deemed optimal is also necessary. Miller (1968), for example, has noted that during the preindustrial era elderly persons were evaluated in terms of their ability to persist at physical labor, whereas con-temporary aged are expected to show deftness in the use of leisure time. In remaining open to such variation, optimization theories will avoid the strictures of previous stage orientations, and yet will provide a framework for understanding growth processes. Finally, research on successful aging requires that the rationale for studying select adulthood and aging populations be articulated and implemented. Schaie (1973) has argued that, if one wants to study optimal intellectual functioning, one should work with a sample of active, intelligent, and intact aged. Personality researchers must be equally willing to investigate with select samples not simply to develop a body of elitist empirical literature, but to learn whether growth processes do, in fact, occur during these age periods and to identify the factors involved in the attainment of higher levels of functioning. Such knowledge is vital from multiple perspectives including education (e.g., countering the view that aging is synonymous with decline and loss), intervention (e.g., identifying and facilitating environments that promote growth), and public policy (e.g., fostering a societal outlook that is not just benevolent to elderly persons but sees them as possessing insight unknown to other age periods). Jung (1933), in discussing the uniqueness of old age, described the art of living as the most distinguished and rare of all the arts. He added that only a few people are artists in life. It is in the study of these artists that research stands to transform the meaning and significance of old age.

References
