



## Continuity of change: The dynamic of beliefs, values, and the aging experience



Aasha I. Hoogland\*

Graduate Center for Gerontology, 1080 Export Street, Suite 280, University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY 40504, USA

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### ABSTRACT

**Objective:** To assess the nature of beliefs and values among older adults with a focus on changes in worldview over time.

**Method:** Eighteen participants (aged 62 to 85) were assigned to three age-stratified 90-minute focus groups. Each group of six addressed questions on the nature of their beliefs and values, and factors influencing these beliefs and values over time. Transcripts were coded using open, axial, and selective coding.

**Results:** Emergent themes included continuity of beliefs over time, a paradoxical change in beliefs demonstrated by an increased appreciation of life, focus on others, and general equanimity and acceptance evidenced by an emphasis on being nonjudgmental and expressing a reduced fear of death.

**Discussion:** Findings support a paradigmatic shift in worldview in old age heavily influenced by personal experiences. Though fundamental components of worldview remain remarkably stable, the expression of these elements is modified as individuals grow older.

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### Introduction

In scholarship, we rarely discuss continued growth in our later years. Indeed, the vast majority of aging research has centered on the ways older adults deteriorate or decline with time. From theories of cell senescence to marketing strategies designed to accommodate sensory deficits in older adults, the literature abounds with perspectives on the way in which both body and the lived experience decline with age. Much of the extant literature neglects the topic of continued development in old age, but it is conceivable, and certainly plausible, that our evolution of perception and thought continues into and throughout old age. This notion is supported by the understanding that memories of prior experiences shape our current and future perceptions; accumulated memories of life experiences, therefore, continue to affect us in some capacity in older adulthood. To explore older adults' perceptions of the evolution

of their own thinking over time, this study employed an inductive strategy utilizing focus groups. The focus group method facilitated discussion among participants that helped reveal the nature and evolution of their worldviews.

#### Historical context

The term 'worldview' can be traced back to at least the 18th century when Immanuel Kant introduced the term '*weltanschauung*' in his writing; translated into English, '*weltanschauung*' is defined as one's intuition of the world (Naugle, 2002). Using Kant's version as a starting point, 'worldview' has been used in a number of works, but is rarely mentioned in aging literature. The way we view the world is constantly evolving, and is shaped by a multitude of endogenous factors such as health, biology, and mental capacity, and a number of exogenous factors including, but not limited to, socioeconomic status, life experiences, environment and culture. This evolution of perception starts very early in life and presumably continues into old age up until the day we die, continually

\* Tel.: +1 859 218 0160.

E-mail address: [aan226@uky.edu](mailto:aan226@uky.edu).

shaping the way we view and interact with the world. In spite of bodily degeneration, an increased prevalence of cognitive deficits, and an overall heightened risk of disease, many older adults follow a normative life trajectory that includes positive change and development. Theories such as Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC; Baltes & Baltes, 1990), Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST; Carstensen, Isaacowitz, & Charles, 1999) and late-life transcendence (Reed, 1991; Tornstam, 2005) maintain that there is such a late-life development, but they are arguably restrictive, pertaining primarily to older adults who have been afforded the developmental 'luxury' of having their basic needs met, as indicated in Maslow's 'needs hierarchy' (Maslow, 1943). More recent literature has highlighted the heterogenous nature of the aging experience (e.g., Ferraro, 1990), but, arguably, current theoretical models of change in old age struggle to account for the dynamism of each individual life trajectory. Further, it is unclear how commonly cited theories of psychosocial development in old age can account for the unique accumulation of life experiences and memories throughout the life course.

#### *Contemporary theories of psychosocial development in old age*

According to Baltes and Baltes' (1990) SOC theory, older adults select abilities or activities that they can enact or utilize effectively as a means of compensating for other abilities or activities that they have difficulty carrying out. SOC theory was formed out of the assumption that successful aging involves maximizing gains and minimizing losses (Baltes, 1997). While relevant for older adults, SOC theory focuses on cognition and behaviors that change as a result of age-related deficits, but does not incorporate emotional change or growth with age. Further, SOC alone cannot adequately account for life experiences and perceptions of experiences that likely have marked effects on decisions and behaviors in old age. A more emotion-oriented attempt at describing change in old age was proposed in Carstensen's Socioemotional Selectivity Theory (SST; 1995). SST states that, as one ages, social goals are driven by emotion-oriented goals, and that older adults exhibit more social selectivity in tandem with changes in their motivational and cognitive processes (Carstensen, 1995; Carstensen, 2006; Carstensen et al., 1999). While SST has had a profound impact on the field of gerontology, the theory does not directly address why older adults perceive such increased selectivity to be meaningful or adaptive, and it has been argued that SST neglects to adequately incorporate enough cognitive integration (Hayslip & Chapman, 2007). Importantly, SST does not provide an explanation of the *nature* of change in one's beliefs and behaviors as a function of increased selectivity and a shift in goal orientation.

#### *Wisdom*

A commonly used definition of wisdom presented by Baltes and Staudinger (2000) is "expertise in the conduct and meaning of life" (p. 124), which is thought to include knowledge (and presumed use) of the components of SOC. Wisdom is a difficult concept to define; implicit theories of wisdom emphasize expert knowledge and subjective interpretations of what it means to be 'wise,' while explicit theories incorporate behavioral tendencies and attempts to operationalize the term for empirical study (Baltes & Staudinger,

2000; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Some conceptions of wisdom also delineate between general wisdom (about life) and personal wisdom (about one's self; Staudinger & Glück, 2011). Wisdom is often to be associated with old age, even though that is often not the case, particularly when differentiating between general and personal wisdom (Staudinger & Glück, 2011).

#### *Transcendence*

Transcendence is inconsistently defined in the literature, but can be thought of as attaining a sense of meaningfulness (Frankl, 1985) following the "dissolution of (self-based) obstacles to empathy, understanding, and integrity" (Levenson, Jennings, Aldwin, & Shiraishi, 2005, p. 129). One manifestation of personal wisdom may in fact be *self-transcendence* (ST), as it allows for "the ability to see through illusion through awareness of one's own cognitive biases" (p. 445, Le & Levenson, 2005; Staudinger & Glück, 2011; Reed, 2003). ST is correlated with numerous personality characteristics, including decreased neuroticism, and increased openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, and agreeableness, although it is unclear whether there is a causal relationship between personality and ST (Levenson et al., 2005).

Sometimes referenced as *Erikson's ninth stage of development* (1998), and qualitatively distinct from the more well-known eighth stage (Brown & Lewis, 2003), another, perhaps more well-known, theory of transcendence is *gerotranscendence*. According to Erikson and Erikson (1998) and Brown and Lewis (2003), gerotranscendence is presented as a potential outcome following resolution of all prior life crises whereby older adults shift their focus from a materialistic/rational paradigm to a cosmic/transcendent view that is often accompanied by increased life satisfaction (Tornstam, 1997). According to Tornstam (2005), there are three primary dimensions of gerotranscendence: cosmic, self, and social and personal relationships. Cosmic transcendence refers to a decreased emphasis on time, and oftentimes an increased focus on childhood, past experiences, or earlier generations (Tornstam, 2005). This dimension also includes a strengthened connection with one's ancestors or heritage, and a decreased fear of death (Tornstam, 2005). The 'self' dimension encompasses growth and development of one's self, and a greater awareness of how one has evolved/is evolving. This concept goes hand in hand with an emphasis on helping others and personal acceptance. Finally, the social and personal relationships dimension deals with fewer social relationships, and an increased desire for (or acceptance of) solitude.

While the presented theories address various facets of development and adaptation in old age, none fully captures broad perceptual changes that older adults experience as they age. Importantly, transcendence theories abstractly tap into shifts in thinking in old age, but neither goes so far as to explain how one's worldview, or set of core beliefs, shifts with age. Further, it is unclear how to operationalize transcendence. These theories present an outcome of normative change (i.e., developmental or innate), but the process and context of developmental change are less clear (Jewell, 2014).

Given the presented gap in the literature addressing how one's overall worldview may change in old age, this study was designed to tap into older adults' perceptions of their own views, including influences on their own beliefs, and how their personal worldviews may have stayed constant or changed in

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