



Differences in perception of gerotranscendence behaviors between college students and community-dwelling older adults



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ABSTRACT

Within the field of gerontology, several different theories have attempted to explain common psychological and social changes associated with the aging process. The Theory of Gerotranscendence is one such theory which purports that a shift in meta-perspective from a more materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one occurs as we age. Corresponding with this shift in meta-perspective, the individual exhibits certain behaviors that could be mistaken as signs of psychopathology if viewed based on the assumptions of more culturally-assimilated theories of aging. The purpose of this study was to examine the difference in perception of gerotranscendence behaviors between college students and older adults. Perceptions were quantified using an instrument that described many behaviors indicative of gerotranscendence within the context of a written narrative depicting an older adult living in an assisted living facility. Respondents were then asked to rate these behaviors in terms of how unusual they were and how concerning they were. As hypothesized, results indicated that several behaviors indicative of gerotranscendence were rated as more concerning and unusual by college students compared to older adults. Implications of these findings in terms of interactions between younger and older individuals occurring in the community and within healthcare settings are discussed.

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Introduction

Within the field of gerontology, significant effort has been devoted to understanding the fundamental nature of how people change psychologically as they age. This includes attempts to explain how elders' self-perceptions change over time, how elders' relationships with others and society may change, and what is the "optimal" amount and type of activity in which one should continue to engage. However, this process has not proven to be easy, as evidenced by the data-rich, explanation-poor status of the field (Achenbaum & Bengtson, 1994). Over the past few decades, several theories have been developed to explain the normal process of aging.

Prominent developmental theories of aging

One of the most prominent theories of aging is activity theory which posits that older adults have the same psychological and social needs as when they were younger (Havighurst, 1961). However, because society withdraws from the aging individual, people are forced to give up their roles (e.g., employee, parent) and decrease social interactions. When the loss of roles occurs, an individual can experience loss of identity, low self-esteem, and isolation. Therefore, in order to experience successful aging, the individual should remain productive in society and replace role losses with new roles and increase social interaction.

Disengagement theory is similar to activity theory in that it focuses on the loss of roles and activity engagement as we age. However, in direct contrast to activity theory, disengagement theory proposes that an aging individual and society mutually withdraw from each other in order to prepare for the eventual

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exit of the individual from society (Cumming & Henry, 1960). As people age, they slowly give up the roles and functions they previously held in society and gradually transfer that role to younger generations. The process of withdrawal and role losses, while inevitable, is seen as positive and even welcomed by the individual. Thus, successful aging depends on an individual being able to effectively complete this process of disengagement.

Erik Erikson's model of human development also addresses developmental concerns of older adults (1966). Most relevant to older adults is Erikson's eighth stage where the individual's primary task involves reflecting on their past experiences. If the individual is satisfied with his life, s/he successfully resolves this stage and attains wisdom and acceptance of death (i.e., ego integrity), whereas failure in this stage leads to regret, despair, and a fear of death.

Finally, the Theory of Gerotranscendence was developed by Lars Tornstam (1989) as a means of addressing limitations in the other prominent developmental theories of aging. Tornstam believed that existing theories did not fully reflect the reality of many older adults' lives and experiences. In short, Tornstam (1997) describes gerotranscendence as the process of human aging that involves a progression toward maturation and wisdom as well as a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one.

According to Tornstam (1997), the individual experiencing gerotranscendence may experience ontological changes on three different levels, the first being the cosmic level which involves changes in the definitions of time and space. Behaviors indicative of changes in the cosmic level may include an increasing connection and attachment to earlier generations, the disappearing fear of death, acceptance of the uncertainty and mystery of life, and greater joy being derived from subtle experiences in life. The second level of change associated with gerotranscendence occurs in the self. These changes may involve the discovery of hidden positive and negative aspects of the self, decreases in self-centeredness, being less concerned about body image, a shift from egoism to altruism, rediscovery of the child within and ego-integrity (i.e., realizing that the pieces of life's jigsaw puzzle form a wholeness). Changes indicative of gerotranscendence may also occur in social and individual relationships. These changes may involve becoming more selective and less interested in superficial relationships, an increasing need for solitude, an understanding of the difference between self and the social roles one inhabits, the addition of innocence to maturity, the understanding of the gravity of wealth and the freedom of "asceticism", realizing the difficulty in separating right from wrong, and withholding from judgments and giving advice.

Gerotranscendence vs. other theories

Based on this definition of gerotranscendence, it is clear that gerotranscendence overlaps somewhat with other theories of aging. First, certain signs that are indicative of gerotranscendence (i.e., increased need for solitude, greater selectivity in social interaction) could be interpreted by others as disengagement. However, while gerotranscendence is sometimes considered an extension of disengagement theory, Tornstam (1994) has articulated a fundamental difference

between the two. First, disengagement implies a turning inward while gerotranscendence implies a new definition of reality. Second, in contrast with disengagement theory, individuals with high gerotranscendence also experience an increase in preferred social activities as well as an increase in need for solitude. Finally, the degree of social activity becomes less essential for life satisfaction at higher levels of gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1994).

Aside from its roots in disengagement theory, gerotranscendence also appears to have similarities with Erikson's eighth stage of development in that gerotranscendence is a process that presumably ends with a higher state of maturity (Tornstam, 1994). In both cases, the mature state also includes contentment and a feeling of affinity with the past. However, the ego-integrity stage described by Erikson is a process of reflection and integration of the past, while gerotranscendence implies looking forward and outward accompanied by a fundamental change in how the self and world are perceived (Tornstam, 1999). Furthermore, there appears to be a spiritual component (i.e., increased feeling of cosmic communion) present in gerotranscendence that is not present in Erikson's theory. Because of this, gerotranscendence can be seen as an extension of Erikson's model (Erikson, 1997; Tornstam, 2005, p. 76).

Finally, similar to activity theory, gerotranscendence proposes that older adults remain active and engaged both socially and otherwise. One significant difference between the two theories is that from the perspective of gerotranscendence theory, normal developmental changes in old age involve a noticeable change in the amount and type of activity. For example, there may be a greater preference for solitary activity that involves reminiscence and reflection on one's past. In addition, older adults may socialize less, but according to gerotranscendence theory, this is interpreted as a deliberate process of selection with the goal of maximizing meaningful and satisfying social interactions and minimizing unpleasant or superficial interactions.

Behavior is always interpreted through the lens of assumptions, values and/or theories. In other words, in order to interpret the meaning of the behavior of others, in this case older adults, one must make these interpretations through the use of a preexisting belief system. Sometimes these beliefs systems are quite explicit in that the observers is aware of their assumptions while in other cases the observe may be unaware of their own assumptions about human behavior. In either case, these belief systems are learned (either explicitly or implicitly), at least in part, from the culture in which one lives and can impact how one overtly behaves toward other people.

In relation to the behavior of older individuals, of the theories discussed above activity theory has likely been the most influential in shaping perceptions of what "successful" aging should look like in Western cultures (Tornstam, 1996; Tornstam & Törnqvist, 2000). Continued activity is often prescribed as the means for a healthy and satisfying old age. Furthermore, it is expected that older individual will maintain the same values, attitudes, perceptions (of self, others and the world) as they did in middle age. However, this theory may not capture the preferences or experiences of many older adults and may instead represent the values and desires of younger people (including gerontologists) concerning what an ideal old age should look like (Tornstam, 1992).

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