



## Embodying positive aging and neoliberal rationality: Talking about the aging body within narratives of retirement



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### ABSTRACT

Within contemporary Western contexts, positive aging discourses are a key aspect of structured mandates for how to think about and act toward aging bodies. This study adds to previous work on embodiment that has situated how aging bodies are managed by focusing on the body as an aspect of retirement preparation, and critically considering how the imperative to govern the aging body in ways consistent with being a 'good' neoliberal citizen circulated through positive aging discourses is negotiated by aging individuals. Utilizing narrative data from a study addressing the discursive re-shaping and narrative negotiation of retirement within the Canadian context conducted with 30 informants aged 45 to 83, this paper draws upon a governmentality perspective to critically analyze ways informants talked about their aging bodies as part of preparing for and moving into retirement. Overall, the findings illustrate how informants embodied positive aging discourses and, in turn, embodied neoliberal rationality particularly in taking up the call to attend to the body as part of the broadening of retirement planning within a neoliberal context in which health, social, financial and other responsibilities are increasingly shifted toward individuals. Although informants described realizing some of the promises offered up with positive aging discourses, such as a sense of youthfulness and bodily control, their narratives also point to detrimental individual and social implications that can arise out of the limits of bodily practices, the need for perpetual risk management, an aversion to oldness, and attributions of failure. As such, this study raises concerns about the implications of the intersections of positive aging discourses and the neoliberal agenda of activation, responsabilization and individualization.

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Although social gerontology has previously been critiqued for failing to acknowledge the materiality of bodily aging and neglecting the body as experienced by aging subjects, a growing body of literature has addressed the aging body (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). This increasing attention has occurred in parallel with a broader recognition of the centrality of the body within social theory, which points to corporeality as integral to the experience and negotiation of everyday life, identity and contemporary forms of governing

(Katz, 2010; Rose, 2007; Slevin, 2010). Utilizing narrative data from a study addressing the discursive re-shaping and narrative negotiation of retirement, this paper critically analyzes ways informants talked about their aging bodies as part of retirement planning and everyday life. Drawing on Foucauldian-informed governmentality scholarship (Dean, 2010; Nadesan, 2008; Rose, 1999), it adds to the literature on aging bodies and the contemporary governance of aging in two central ways. First, it builds on existing research that has examined how older adults negotiate their aging bodies in relation to positive aging discourses by focusing on the body in relation to retirement. Second, it explicitly draws upon a

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governmentality perspective to raise considerations related to the social and individual implications of the imperatives to monitor and optimize the at-risk aging body circulated through contemporary positive aging discourses aligned with neoliberal rationality.

### Aging, body image and embodiment

Both Clarke and Korotchenko (2011) and Katz (2010) have provided critical analysis of literature addressing aging bodies. A large part of this literature has focused on body image, that is, how older adults perceive and feel about their bodies, and has considered the influence of social attributes such as gender, sexuality, and health status. This research has demonstrated the situatedness of older adults' body images within a broader socio-cultural context and consumer-based culture in which youthful, healthy, slim bodies are idealized, such that 'signs' of bodily aging are often negatively experienced and present challenges to self-esteem and identity continuity (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011).

Literature on embodiment has gone beyond examining how bodies are perceived, to consider how the aging body is managed in everyday life, how identity is embodied and how age is accomplished (Clarke & Korotchenko, 2011; Laz, 2003; Twigg, 2007). Such work has examined how older adults experience bodily changes related to illness and disability, pointing to experiences of biographical disruption as well as strategies to incorporate bodily changes into biographies. There has also been a focus on appearance work, that is, on how aging individuals work on their bodies in order to appear as young as possible and thereby manage relationships and self-identity. For example, situating beauty work within intersections of ageism and sexism, Clarke and colleagues (Clarke, 2002; Clarke & Bundon, 2009; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Clarke & Warren, 2007) have critically pointed to how aging females are located in a viscous cycle in which their "choices are ultimately determined in a world where to challenge ageist stereotypes is to run the risk of further stigmatization and permanent invisibility" (Clarke & Griffin, 2008, p. 671).

In relation to embodied identity, numerous studies have highlighted the discrepancy and tensions aging subjects experience between a felt youthful identity, chronological age and aging appearances. Such findings have often been interpreted in relation to Featherstone and Hepworth's (1995) concept of the 'mask of aging' and Kaufman's (1986) concept of the 'ageless self', both of which emphasize how aging subjects experience the aging body as concealing an essential, ageless identity (Katz, 2010). Studies have also examined the distancing and resisting strategies used by aging adults to ensure they do not look, act or feel old. For example, in a qualitative study involving 57 subjects aged 60 to 89, Slevin (2010) found that subjects used a variety of strategies to create an image of themselves as in control of their aging bodies and to resist negative images of oldness. In another qualitative study involving 15 informants aged 50 to 73, Laz (2003) emphasized how informants accomplished age through narratively addressing issues such as fitness, activity and health so as to position themselves as youthful.

Thus, studies conducted within primarily Western contexts consistently find that aging individuals work on their aging bodies as a means to resist or deny aging and separate their sense of identity from bodily changes attributed to aging

(Andrews, 1999; Calasanti, 2005; Lamb, 2014). In addition to addressing how this bifurcation of the body and self creates tensions for aging individuals, critical gerontologists have emphasized the need to critically situate such findings "by exposing the cultural contexts that shape them" (Calasanti & Slevin, 2006, p. 185) and conceptualizing the body "as the central mediation point between the structured mandates by which we live our lives and the agential and experimental forms of identity we use to negotiate such mandates" (Katz, 2010, p. 364). To date, key foci of empirical work that has situated how aging bodies are managed have included ageism, gender, consumer culture, and the anti-aging industry (Cardona, 2008; Marshall & Katz, 2002; Minichiello, Browne, & Kendig, 2000; Twigg, 2006). Within contemporary Western contexts, another key aspect of discursively 'structured mandates' for conducting life, including how to think about and act toward aging bodies, are positive aging discourses (Biggs, 2001; Sandberg, 2013).

### Governing aging bodies: 'positive' aging discourses and the broadening of retirement preparation

Positive aging discourses, a term being used to encompass various discourses which outline idealized ways to age that involve remaining youthful, healthy, productive, socially engaged and self-reliant, have become central to national and international approaches to governing aging populations, gerontological theory and research, and popular media (Asquith, 2009; Boudiny, 2013; Dillaway & Byrnes, 2009). Over the past few decades, textual and visual representations of positive aging discourses have pervaded an array of public spaces and texts, such as self-help books, media, governmental policies, academic literature, advertisements, health promotion initiatives, and health care organizations (Lamb, 2014). From a governmentality perspective, such discourses have been conceptualized as technologies of government that enact power through shaping possibilities for how aging citizens, particularly those in the 'third age', can and should understand themselves and act in relation to age. As such, these discourses establish new standards for 'aging well' and shape new types of 'active' aging citizens (Higgs, Leontowitsch, Stevenson, & Jones, 2009; Laliberte Rudman & Molke, 2009).

Although positive aging discourses have been shaped with varying intents by an array of types of social actors and authorities, critical analyses of positive aging discourses as taken up, shaped and circulated within various types of governmental texts in several Western nations have raised concerns regarding how such discourses have intersected with neoliberal rationality such that responsibilities for the management of bodily, financial and social risks of aging have increasingly been shifted from states and other institutions to individuals. Simultaneously, an array of bodily, lifestyle and consumer practices, consistent with neoliberal emphases on activation, individualization and responsabilization (Rose, 1999), are promoted as legitimate, moral, and desirable means to care for the body and self, manage the risks of aging, and achieve idealized outcomes related to health, youth, functionality, productivity and self-reliance (Asquith, 2009; Biggs, 2001; Conway & Crawshaw, 2009). Within this discursive context, "aging and the hazards of growing older form another arena in which the autonomous self is expected

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