



## Toward a discourse shift in social gerontology: From successful aging to harmonious aging

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### ABSTRACT

Successful aging, though controversial, is used as an overarching conceptual framework in social gerontology. In this theory critique, the discourse of successful aging is identified as problematic with respect to four dimensions. First, successful aging is ageist in nature, and it produces a disharmony between body and mind. Second, successful aging, with the emphasis on quantifiable activities driven by the “busy ethic,” overlooks the deeper concern of quality experience. Third, the capitalist and consumerist components of successful aging are under-addressed. Fourth, successful aging is a discourse developed upon Western (specifically American) values and thus may not readily apply to other cultures.

Harmonious aging, as proposed, is inspired by the Yin–Yang philosophy. Harmony refers to the balance based on differences instead of uniformity. This new discourse aims to recognize the challenges and opportunities of old age itself, ease the tension between activity and disengagement theories, heal the integrity of body and mind, and emphasize the interdependent nature of human beings. The call for the discourse shift attempts to promote intellectual exploration of what constitutes a good old age and to capture more cross-cultural diversities in the context of global aging. This theoretical endeavor is important to change the status quo of gerontology as being “data rich but theory poor,” and to contribute to cross-cultural gerontological research, education and communication.

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### The significance of this theory critique

This theoretical endeavor is important to change the status quo of gerontology, which is often described as “data rich but theory poor” (Birren & Bengtson, 1988, In Achenbaum, 2009, p. 27). The concern over the lack of theory in gerontology has been echoed within the field for a while, such as the plea for a “revolutionary paradigm shift” (Friedan, 1993, In Andrews, 1999, p. 315) and the notification of the “inadequacy of available conceptual frameworks” (Hazan, 1994, In Andrews, 1999, p. 316). Biggs, Lowenstein, and Hendricks (2003) touch on the root cause of this status quo

by problematizing “the historical burden of structural-functionalism and the largely atheoretical and pragmatic empiricism of North American gerontology from which Western social gerontology takes its cue (p. 3).”

Today, we are witnesses of the “productivity” of various theoretical perspectives in social gerontology, summarized by Tornstam (2005) as the pathological perspective, the activity perspective, the disengagement perspective, the continuity perspective, the developmental perspective, the mask of aging perspective, the masquerade perspective, and the selection, optimization and compensation perspective. Seemingly, we no longer lack theories. However, another problem arises: the same behavior thus can be interpreted differently depending on the perspective taken (Tornstam, 2005), since these theories are all fragmented. Achenbaum (2009) points to the necessity of moving social gerontology toward a more dialectic approach; Bass (2009) elucidates the need

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for an integrative theory of social gerontology through blending macro and micro perspectives.

So far, successful aging, though problematic, is still the dominant conceptual framework of aging studies and is most frequently referred to. The irony is that, although successful aging is a discourse developed on the basis of empirical data collected in the United States, it is applied without further reflection to many outside cultures. Encouraged by the words “the student of aging needs to be not only a psychologist and a sociologist but also a philosopher” (Kohlberg & Shulik, 1981, In Andrews, 1999, p. 316), we dare to explore a more comprehensive, yet less normative discourse by borrowing from the authors’ philosophy and cross-cultural background. Hereby, we tentatively name the new discourse as harmonious aging. The discourse of harmonious aging that we propose attempts to promote intellectual exploration on the meaning of old age and to capture cultural diversities in the context of global aging. This work is expected to contribute to cross-cultural gerontological research, education, and communication.

The goal of this theory critique is to raise awareness of the problems that exist with the dominant theoretical paradigm of successful aging and to call for a discourse shift. We identify successful aging as problematic with respect to four dimensions. First, successful aging is ageist in nature by denying the inevitable physical changes in old age and advocating an unrealistic cultural ideal of “agelessness” (Andrews, 1999). Consequentially, it could produce self-denial and self-hatred, a disharmony between body and mind, especially among those who are most disadvantaged by the hierarchical structure of our society. Second, successful aging, with the emphasis on quantifiable activities driven by the “busy ethic (Ekerdt, 1986)”, overlooks the deeper concern of quality experience, which is crucial to an individual’s well-being. The frequency of activity participation or the number of various activities, as often asked in survey studies, is informative yet limited. This quantified focus in gerontology prohibits us from knowing the meaning of the activity and how the experience shapes one’s well-being, not to mention that the characteristics of activity involvement among older people might be more selective or adaptive. Third, the capitalist and consumerist components of successful aging are under-addressed. It is worth reminding our gerontologists that successful aging is often used as the trademark for selling the idea of “lifestyles” (Featherstone & Wernick, 1995; Katz & Barbara, 2003). This business strategy creates the illusionary need of the older populations worldwide to be forever young and conceals the true, humanist meaning of old age. Fourth, successful aging is a discourse based on Western (specifically the U.S.) values and thus may not be applicable to other cultures. Success itself is a cultural concept that emphasizes individual achievement and productivity, which might not be universally desired. Furthermore, success, as opposed to failure, is a discriminative concept by its nature. It indicates an attitude of exclusion by distinguishing those “successful” agers from those “unsuccessful” agers (Katz, 2000).

### Decoding successful aging

The widely-used conceptual model of successful aging, which was developed by Rowe and Kahn (1997), includes

three major components: “the avoidance of disease and disability, the maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities” (p. 433). The key to identifying the problems with successful aging is to disclose its hidden codes. Below, we are going to decode the deeper theoretical implications of this theoretical paradigm and point out its flaws through four dimensions.

#### *The illusion of “agelessness”*

The discourse of successful aging is embedded in the belief that being capable of staying young and active is the key to a “good” old age. Obviously, it depicts a biased, incomplete picture of the aging process; it fails to face up to the normal aging of the body, “an underlying time-dependent biological process that, although not itself a disease, involves functional loss and susceptibility to disease and death” (Moody & Sasser, 2012, p. 55). Successful aging as a theoretical framework fundamentally denies old age by advocating agelessness – old age is simply “more of the same,” a resemblance and/or an extension of youthfulness and middle-age values. It fails to acknowledge the uniqueness of old age – “old age has both less and more” compared to the young (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986; McHugh, 2000). McHugh (2000) harshly criticizes how Arizona is marketed and promoted as a place where “ageless” seniors live in a lifestyle representing a prolongation of midlife, which actually is ageist in its core. Andrews’s (1999) critique of the anti-aging strategy hits the nail on the head: hiding the physical signs of aging causes a disharmony between body and mind. The insistence on staying youthful and being active – the ideology behind successful aging – imposes a “false dualism” (Andrews, 1999, p. 301) between external and internal self-images. Since all of us will inevitably age, as our prolonged life expectancy suggests, the aging individuals are susceptible for self-denial and self-hatred. The discourse of successful aging itself is a form of ageism. It appears to fight the stereotypical association of old age with social withdrawal, but the problem lies with the lack of structural critique of this discourse (Andrews, 1999).

By advocating agelessness, successful aging may also simultaneously ignore the power relations within. Successful aging might elude those who have fewer resources and are positioned at the lower hierarchy of power relations. Feminist gerontologists challenge the patriarchal nature of successful aging and point out that the implicit code of success is, in fact, based on a White, heterosexual, middle-class, male standard (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001). Calasanti and Slevin (2001) address the importance of the role that gender plays in the intersection with other social locations, such as race/ethnicity and social class. The model of successful aging ignores gender differences, racial/ethnic identity, and fails to capture the factual diversity of older populations. It is not only a privileged model with hidden codes but is also developed upon the American values placed on defining success. Successful aging has become a normative, standardized discourse that embodies an ideal for a good old age, while it fails to recognize or appreciate the diverse experiences and meanings existing in the lives of elders. For the elders in disadvantaged social locations, they are more likely to be the victims of the mainstream “successful aging” ideology.

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