



“I want to be 100 years old, but I smoke too much”: Exploring the gap between positive aging goals and reported preparatory actions in different social circumstances



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ABSTRACT

Preparing for positive aging is shaped by the social context a person lives in. The present qualitative study explores and compares representations about preparatory actions in precarious workers (i.e., with temporary job contracts and insecure pension plans) and individuals with secure pension plans living in Germany. It also examines the discrepancy between what middle-aged persons think they should be doing in preparation and what they report doing for aging well. Findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted here show that people who have insecure pension plans tend to see themselves as social networkers and optimists, while those with secure pension plans see themselves as social activists and careful planners of old age. All participants value an active, healthy body but manage to do little in order to attain it due to lacking time and discipline. In accordance with the socioemotional selectivity theory, perceiving a short-time perspective makes precarious individuals focus on emotional goals, while financially secure individuals value social goals. Implications for practice and policy change are discussed.

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And yet Lenny Abramov ... will live forever. The technology is almost here ... I just have to be good and have to believe in myself. I just have to stay off the trans fats ... I just have to drink plenty of green tea and alkalized water and submit my genome to the right people. (Shteyngart, 2010: 5)

Introduction

Lenny Abramov, the main character in the contemporary novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2010) has it all figured out. At the age of 39 years, he has decided to live forever and is determined to do all humanly possible to achieve this goal. Like a true representative of the youth culture that

dominates modern society, he does not think about positive aging but imagines himself as forever young (Katz, 2000; Katz & Marshall, 2003). His decision raises the question, can his actions motivate preparation for a positive old age? Like the Lenny character, many individuals would like to delay old age, but less is known about their concrete actions and thoughts on preparation for old age. Previous literature has explored media portrayals of aging (Zimmermann & Grebe, 2014; Rozanova, 2010), beliefs on aging (Sellers, Bolender, & Crocker, 2010), attitudes toward old age (Abrams, Vaclair, & Swift, 2011), aging stereotypes (Levy, 2003), and views on aging (Wurm, Tesch-Römer, & Tomasik, 2007; Wurm, Tomasik, & Tesch-Römer, 2010). All of these inform on positive aging goals, but still little is known about how people choose the means to reach these. Despite an increasing body of evidence regarding processes related to successful or positive aging, highlighting the importance of selection, optimization, and compensation strategies (SOC, Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002) or

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of proactive coping (Ouweland, deRidder, & Bensing, 2007), knowledge about how middle-aged think about the actual preparation processes is needed. Moreover, how difficult or how easy they perceive this decisional process to be might influence how motivated they are to start preparing to reach the healthy old age they desire (i.e., Adopt a healthy lifestyle, create their own aging friendly environment, build social support networks, deal with negative emotions, etc.). The present article wants to bring its contribution by understanding the preparation phase for a positive old age rather than peoples' representations of positive aging. Furthermore, it aims to explore the discrepancy between what people think they should do in order to reach a good old age and what they are actually doing in preparation. How individuals prepare for old age depends on the social and temporal context in which they are aging (Breheny & Stephens, 2010; Tesch-Römer, 2012). For instance, it has been argued that perceiving a limited time perspective influences what kind of goals people formulate for themselves. Namely, an awareness of life's fragility makes people focus on emotional goals and deriving positive emotional meaning out of life (Fung & Carstensen, 2006). Working on a short-term contract may represent a situation when one deals with daily uncertainty in addition to having to deal with pension insecurity, which may make it more difficult to prepare for a happy old age. In addition, holding negative images of aging might also place people at a disadvantage concerning preparation for healthy aging (Levy & Myers, 2004). Recent studies suggest that in Germany, negative images of aging still prevail (Craciun & Flick, 2014; Wurm & Huxhold, 2012), and these are more prevalent in people with lower education level or socio-economic status (Wurm, Berner, & Tesch-Römer, 2013) and persons with insecure pension plans (Craciun & Flick, 2014). Thus, Germans who face an uncertain future because of their insecure pension plans might also prepare for aging in a different way as compared to individuals who have a secure pension and can plan what to do in order to enjoy their retirement years.

Positive aging: what it means and how to prepare

The concept of positive aging derived from the positive psychology literature and describes life transitions that are construed to maximize well-being (Hill, 2011). To reach a positive old age, it is suggested that one requires skills such as the ability to mobilize latent coping abilities, thought and behavior flexibility, decision-making style that enhances well-being, and optimistic viewpoints even about decline associated with old age (Hill, 2005). At the WHO and EU policy level, positive aging principles were comprised under the name of active aging policy (Lassen & Moreira, 2014). In accordance to such policy, preparation for old age implies several decisions that one needs to take such as making lifestyle changes (e.g., maintain physical activity level, decide where to live in old age and organize the environment so as to fit old age needs, organize care facilities, changing eating or physical activity patterns, etc.). Failure to take preparatory actions to achieve a healthy old age was attributed to a lack of self-regulatory process (e.g., lack of planning skills) or how people choose some goals over others as described by the SOC model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). Socioemotional selectivity theory (Carstensen, 1992; Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003) postulates that when

people are confronted with the finitude of their lives, their attention may shift from future-oriented goals to emotionally relevant ones. Fung and Carstensen (2006) showed that when sociocultural events prime the fragility of life (i.e., September 11 or the annexation of Hong Kong to China), both young and old people are more motivated to derive meaning out of life and value emotionally meaningful relations over social contacts that might be useful in the future. The importance that people attribute to their goals changes as a function of perceived time. When the future is perceived as open-ended, people tend to focus on information-seeking goals, while when limited time perspectives are perceived (i.e., When being diagnosed with a terminal illness, when reaching old age, etc.), people tend to value emotionally meaningful goals (balancing emotional states or feeling needed by others).

A more critical perspective on positive aging describes the norms of activity and productivity in old age as manifestations of a neo-liberal ideology, that places people who do not manage to keep active at a disadvantage in what concerns aging well (Katz, 2000; Katz & Marshall, 2003; Rozanova, 2010). One example could be people who have an insecure pension plan (Craciun & Flick, 2014).

Precariousness and how it might affect preparation for positive aging

Precariousness has been described to define situations that evoke insecurity, unpredictability, and depletion of resources. Precarious workers, described as having insecure pension plans and temporary jobs (Portacolone, 2013), may find it more difficult to carefully plan their old age. When referring to precarious living contexts, Bauman (2007) mentions the collapse of long-term thinking, planning, and acting and the disappearance and weakening of social structures in which planning could be inscribed for a long time to come. According to Bauman (2007), individuals are engaged rather in a series of short-term projects and life episodes and this may influence the way they prepare for old age. Preparation implies a series of actions that are taken at present with the goal to serve in the future. How do these preparatory efforts differ between those who cannot picture this future and the ones who can have it all carefully planned (even if this may prove to be an illusion)? The first category perceives a short time frame for preparation (i.e., They work on temporary contracts), the latter a long time frame (i.e., They have stable jobs and a good insurance for their retirement years); they do things today for collecting the benefits in the future.

It is relevant to distinguish a low socio-economic status (SES) from the state of precariousness. Having a low SES implies a poor income and the afferent life uncertainty. A precarious worker might earn a good income but experience the stress and uncertainty of not being able to plan one's life being on a temporary contract. Thus, the main factor that would negatively influence a person's health becomes the factual and perceived job and pension insecurity (Marmot & Wilkinson, 2005) rather than low income itself (Corna, 2013).

In the German context, the rising number of mini jobs (i.e., jobs paid with 400 Euro per month) make saving for old age or engaging in health behaviors less probable. Poverty in old age becomes reality especially for freelancers, unemployed, or single mothers (Börsch Supan, Gasche, & Lamla, 2013).

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