



Successful ageing: A historical overview and critical analysis of a successful concept



Morten Hillgaard Bülow*, Thomas Söderqvist

^a The Center for Healthy Aging, University of Copenhagen, Blegdamsvej 3B, 2200 Copenhagen, Denmark

^b Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen, Fredericiagade 18, 1310 Copenhagen, Denmark

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 1980s, the concept of ‘successful ageing’ has set the frame for discourse about contemporary ageing research. Through an analysis of the reception to John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn’s launch of the concept of ‘successful ageing’ in 1987, this article maps out the important themes and discussions that have emerged from the interdisciplinary field of ageing research. These include an emphasis on interdisciplinarity; the interaction between biology, psycho-social contexts and lifestyle choices; the experiences of elderly people; life-course perspectives; optimisation and prevention strategies; and the importance of individual, societal and scientific conceptualisations and understandings of ageing. By presenting an account of the recent historical uses, interpretations and critiques of the concept, the article unfolds the practical and normative complexities of ‘successful ageing’.

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Introduction

The concept of ‘successful ageing’ has played a central role in contemporary research and public discourse about ageing for more than two decades. Famously articulated in a paper titled “Human aging: usual and successful” (Rowe & Kahn, 1987), published in the journal *Science*, the concept has since been extensively used in scientific literature, along with related concepts like ‘active ageing’, ‘positive ageing’, ‘healthy ageing’ and ‘optimal ageing’. Rowe and Kahn’s short, programmatic paper has not only been widely cited in the geriatrics, gerontology and ageing research literature, but also by researchers from nursing science, odontology, psychology, sociology, political science, and other fields of broad relevance to the medical, social, cultural and political understandings of ageing. Since 1987, more than 2000 research papers and chapters in collected volumes have

referred to Rowe and Kahn’s paper, and it is still being widely cited today.¹ Several hundred articles have also used the term ‘successful ageing’ without referring explicitly to this original article.

This continuous and diverse reference to Rowe and Kahn’s paper in the scientific and scholarly literature over the last quarter century indicates that the concept of ‘successful ageing’ touches upon some of the basic concerns in contemporary understandings of ageing. Our point of departure for this paper is the assumption that the concept of ‘successful ageing’ has become an obligatory passage point both for medical researchers, and for scholars interested in ageing from a social–scientific perspective. By following the reception of the concept, and by analysing its uses and the debates around it, we aim to highlight some of the fundamental issues and problematics within current ageing research that have emerged from and along with this concept.

* Corresponding author at: Medical Museion, University of Copenhagen, Fredericiagade 18, 1310 Copenhagen, Denmark. Tel.: +45 40 78 20 37.

E-mail address: mohib@sund.ku.dk (M.H. Bülow).

¹ Google Scholar shows 2050 citations and, according to Web of Science, 998 of these are from scientific articles (December 31, 2013).

The purpose of this article, then, is to analyse the themes that have emerged and map the complexities and important issues involved in the reception of Rowe and Kahn's concept. We concentrate this thematic history on the concept's initial reception until the end of the 1990s, which can be characterised as the concept's most formative period, and well illustrates the emerging themes and problematics that are also present in more recent publications. In the following, we first introduce Rowe and Kahn's paper and briefly describe the context of its origin as well as its basic arguments. We then follow the paper's reception within the broad field of ageing research, highlighting themes and discussions among some of the central players in the field.

The empirical basis for the analysis is the published research literature based on a systematic search in two online databases: Web of Science for peer-reviewed journal articles and Google Scholar (to capture book chapters and other academic sources not listed in WoS). We sorted through this material to pinpoint those articles that directly engage with the concept (i.e., make more than just a passing reference to Rowe and Kahn's article). This heuristic exercise provided us with an overview of the prime discussants and themes, but the wealth of data also necessitated that other avenues of investigation remain unexplored. For instance, quite a few publications were directed more at general questions of health care policies or 'quality of life' and were not included here.

As the material and themes emerging from this investigation show, the subject of ageing is very heterogeneous. This is also reflected in the structure of this article; rather than draw out one theme or discourse, we think it is more useful to convey some of the complexity present in the historical material. As researchers involved with ageing will be the first to recognise, this complexity is a characteristic of the phenomena of ageing and ageing research, not least when engaging with conceptual frameworks like 'successful ageing'.

Laying the foundation for success

Although the notion of 'successful ageing' can also be found in earlier literature on ageing, it did not have much impact on the discourse and practices of ageing research. The breakthrough for the concept came with the MacArthur Foundation Study on Successful Aging, led by gerontologist John W. Rowe and funded for ten years between 1984 and 1993; data from the study was still being analysed and published for several years afterwards (e.g., Glass, Seeman, Herzog, Kahn, & Berkman, 1995; Rowe & Kahn, 1998; Seeman et al., 1994; Seeman, Singer, & Charpentier, 1995). When the study began in 1984, American gerontology was perceived to be in a crisis. In terms of national research funding, priorities had changed from clinical and health-care services to basic biomedical research, particularly research on Alzheimer's disease. Earlier biomedical investigations that once seemed promising had failed to find a cure for or a method to defer "the vicissitudes of senescence". Furthermore, disengagement theory, the formerly dominant theory within social and behavioural ageing research formulated in the early 1960s – which stated that ageing naturally and inevitably entailed a gradual withdrawal from society and

social relations (Cumming & Henry, 1961; cf. Bengtson, Silverstein, Putney, & Ganz, 2009) – had by the mid-1980s become discredited and seemed outdated (Achenbaum, 2000: 419). The need for new theoretical developments was therefore widely recognised by the gerontological community (Katz, 1996: 104–134; Rowe & Kahn, 1998: xi; personal e-mail correspondence, Rowe 17 January 2011).

The task set by the MacArthur Foundation was to lay the intellectual and methodological foundation for a "new gerontology". To fulfil this aim, the Foundation emphasised the importance of interdisciplinary co-operation. Cross- and interdisciplinarity had characterised ageing research since the emergence of a field of gerontology in the early 20th century, but the call for interdisciplinary approaches to ageing gained importance from the 1980s onwards (Katz, 1996; Achenbaum, 1995; cf. Rowe, 1997). As director of the MacArthur study, Rowe assembled a group of 16 well-known researchers from high-profile institutions spread out across the United States with diverse biomedical, behavioural and social-scientific backgrounds. The study did not include interdisciplinary co-operation with scholars from the humanities, however, and all the researchers selected had fairly similar views on what counted as a scientific approach (Achenbaum, 2000).

In contrast, and by their own count, the MacArthur successful-ageing study resulted in almost one hundred scientific publications (Rowe & Kahn, 1998: xiii). Furthermore, the research and formulation of the concept that the assembled group of researchers had developed – and which was first articulated in the "Human aging: usual and successful" article – was disseminated to a large number of researchers. This included the members of the Gerontological Society of America, "the world's largest group of scholars in gerontology", who each received a copy of Rowe & Kahn's, 1998 book *Successful Aging*, which expanded upon the main themes of their initial article (Rowe & Kahn, 1998: xiii; Achenbaum, 2000: 425). Although in this article we focus on the original article and not the book, the book's popular dissemination of the MacArthur study's results can be seen as an important work of interdisciplinary science communication. In this and other ways, the concept of 'successful ageing' was brought to a wider professional audience, and it subsequently influenced the agendas of several prominent scientific institutions in both the United States and Europe.

Furthermore, growing medical and political concern about the possible economic and health-care 'burdens' related to North America's ageing populations provided a significant context for how 'successful ageing' emerged as a conceptual frame for ageing research. Often mentioned in ageing-research publications from this period (including most of the publications discussed here), this concern produced new demands for the governance of ageing bodies and populations. Such governing was increasingly framed within dominant discourses of neoliberal politics, which emphasised solutions based on individual responsibility – something with which 'successful ageing' has also been strongly associated (Sandberg, 2008: 122–123). Thus, the history in which successful-ageing discussions and practices participate can also be related to the political management of life and death on both an individual and population level – or the biopolitics of ageing, to use a Foucauldian term. Biopolitical analyses of ageing research

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