The Emergence of a Positive Gerontology: From Disengagement to Social Involvement

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The latter part of the 20th century was a period characterized by a fundamental transition in scholarship on activity and the aging process. Theory emphasizing the inevitable decline of human capacity was gradually replaced with concepts stressing positive, multidimensional views of aging. In this article, we highlight the key contributors and trace the origins and overlapping themes of successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement in later life: 3 examples of scholarship representing a “positive” gerontology. Rowe and Kahn’s model of successful aging highlights the interplay between social engagement with life, health, and functioning for a positive aging experience. Productive aging, led by Robert Butler, recognizes the previously underappreciated participation of older adults in activities such as volunteering, paid work, and caregiving, and generates interest in the individual and societal barriers to and benefits of participation. Civic engagement in later life raises public awareness about the need to involve older adults in the community, creates opportunities for participation, and generates further interest in the mutual benefit of participation for community beneficiaries and participants. Successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement represent important contributions to the field of gerontology through applications to policy, advocacy, and theory development.

Key Words: Productive aging, Successful aging, Civic engagement

Contemporary literature on the aging experience is replete with themes of productivity and success. Yet this positive tone was often lacking in the roots of gerontological discourse. Early conceptual models emphasize the inevitability of decline and dependence in later life, with disengagement theory offering perhaps the most familiar example. Important theoretical changes in the conceptualization of the aging process, coupled with the publication of empirical work documenting the vitality, strength, and contributions of older adults, resulted in the emergence of multiple positive perspectives on aging.

In this article, we highlight three interconnecting examples of a positive gerontology: successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement in later life. These areas of research share the insight that success, productivity, and engagement are, in fact, features of a “normal” aging experience.
Each stems from a theoretical understanding of late life that incorporates its potential as a time of contribution, adaptation, and success, yielding a comprehensive understanding of the aging process and of the older adult population. Our goal in this piece is to review the key conceptual advancements evident in these clusters that illustrate the creation and evolution of a positive gerontology. The three examples presented here do not represent an exhaustive review of positive views on aging nor was a comprehensive review of each cluster possible in the space allotted. Instead, we discuss the contributions stemming from these areas of inquiry and highlight the synergy and limitations in this evolving scholarship.

**Early Approaches to Understanding the Aging Process**

Early literature on human aging stemmed from the assumption of inevitable decline in later life, as evident in both the medical and societal views of aging (Butler, 1975; Nascher, 1914). Psychosocial perspectives also focused on the degeneration associated with aging (Lupien & Wan, 2004; Miles, 1933). Building upon a commonly held assumption of decline as a normal feature of aging, Cumming and Henry (1961) put forth disengagement theory as a systematic way of understanding the social withdrawal accompanying age-related personal declines. The central premise was that as skills decline and remaining life is perceived to be short, a mutual withdrawal from social obligations occurs between an individual and society. Though disengagement theory garnered much theoretical attention (Achenbaum & Bengtson, 1994), early critiques cited its lack of consideration of individual variability and its poor fit with the evidence (Maddox, 1965).

The assumption of late-life decline as a normal feature of aging was quickly challenged in academic and nonacademic circles. In the academic literature, activity theory and continuity theory offered compelling alternative views of later life, arguing, respectively, that activity in later life yields life satisfaction (Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972) and that older adults seek continuity as they adapt to changes in later life (Atchley, 1989). In the policy and advocacy realms, participating in society and contributing to their communities were identified as both a right and an obligation for older adults. For example, a founding principle of the AARP (2009), as espoused by Ethel Percy Andrus in 1958, is “To encourage older people ‘To serve, not to be served.’” A similar theme is reflected in the report of the 1961 White House Conference on Aging, which cited seeking out opportunities to play meaningful social roles as an “obligation” of older adults, and highlighted as a fundamental right for older Americans “the right to be useful” through participation in civic affairs, activities, and employment (U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, 1961).

These correctives—in academic, policy, and advocacy settings—reflected a large-scale movement toward a positive gerontology that continues today. Relinquishing the assumption of decline led to a focus on the ways in which health and well-being were maintained well into later life, as a common feature of normal aging. Adaptive processes, based in activity and social participation, were recognized as key. As an early example, Palmore (1979) found that participating in group activities and physical exercise contributed to higher levels of happiness and good health and to increased probability of survival to age 75. Psychological emphases shifted to variability in the aging process and the adaptive capacity of individuals (Neugarten, 1973; Ryff, 1982). Gradually, biomedical research recognized the distinction between the process of aging and the progression of disease and disability (Rowe & Kahn, 1987; Vaillant & Mukamal, 2001).

**Successful Aging, Productive Activity, and Civic Engagement**

The movement toward a more balanced perspective on the experience of later life—a more positive gerontology—redirected the imagination of scholars toward ways in which older adults maintain productive and engaged attachments to roles and activities and focused attention on the benefits resulting to participants and to others as a result. The new sensibility is reflected by the convergence of three overlapping clusters of research: successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement. Each of these literatures focuses on a somewhat distinctive aspect of a positive gerontology, yet all directly or indirectly reflect the significance of engagement with life and participation in socially valued roles for personal well-being.

References to successful aging are scattered along the progression of theoretical perspectives in gerontology, albeit with varied meanings attached. An early definition offered by Havighurst (1961)
identified successful aging as the experience of joy, happiness, and satisfaction in later life. Both disengagement and activity theory referred to successful aging, though each offered polar opposite views on the means of achieving success in later life (Havighurst, 1961; Maddox, 1965). Withdrawal from social life was viewed as normative and a sign of successful aging according to disengagement theory, whereas activity theory promoted continued action as evidence of successful aging. Neugarten’s (1972) conceptualization of successful aging, discussed in her Kleemeier Award Lecture, highlights life satisfaction as a key indicator of successful aging; her discussion draws attention to continuity in personality characteristics as adults age and references a high level of diversity in the aging process.

Contemporary usage of the term “successful aging” is frequently aligned with ideas drawn from two multidimensional approaches: selective optimization with compensation (SOC) and Rowe and Kahn’s work on “usual” and “successful” aging. Working from a perspective that incorporates continuity theory and people’s adaptive capacity, Baltes and Baltes (1990) developed the SOC model of successful aging. According to SOC, people use strategies of selection, optimization, and compensation to adjust expectations and behavior with advancing age, thereby optimizing self-efficacy and personal satisfaction while compensating for age-related changes. Freund and Baltes (1998) show a correlation between those older adults who report utilizing the strategies of SOC and subjective measures of successful aging—the absence of feeling lonely, positive affect, and enhanced well-being. Rowe and Kahn’s (1987, 1997, 1998) framework defines successful aging as occurring at the intersection of good health, high physical and cognitive functioning, and active involvement in social activities. A goal of the MacArthur Studies on Successful Aging is identification of the multiple biological, cognitive, physical, and psychosocial factors influencing the variation that leads some adults to remain ambulatory and active, whereas others experience functional limitations and inactivity. Distinguishing between “usual” and “successful” aging makes clear that aging successfully is often not achieved; yet Rowe and Kahn’s framework suggests that positive aging is achievable by many adults through modifiable factors, including health behaviors and social participation. A substantial literature draws on the principles offered in these models of aging successfully (Hsu & Jones, 2012; Ng et al., 2011; Wahl et al., 2013). Poon and colleagues’ Healthy & Successful Aging project represents an ongoing effort to remedy some of the definitional and theoretical ambiguity within the successful aging literature while simultaneously building a knowledge base with practical implications for promoting health in later life (Martin, Kelly, Kahana, Kahana, & Poon, 2012).

The development of productive aging as a topic of investigation stemmed jointly from aging advocacy and from continuity theory (Bass & Caro, 2001). Increased longevity, rising human capital, and changing expectations altered the scholarly discourse on aging in the 1980s; however, social lag in attitudes about late life and older people persisted, and ageist stereotypes limited the opportunities available to older adults in society (Palmore, 2005). By the end of the decade, Butler (1989) suggested that the pervasiveness and persistence of ageism should be actively treated as a disease. One of the public remedies he suggested is the active promotion of productive aging, including paid work as well as many socially valued activities that are unpaid.

The literature describes numerous activities as evidence of productive aging, including paid and unpaid work, assistance to others, and caregiving. Empirical findings show continuity in unpaid productive activities between midlife and the postretirement years, with high rates of participation well into later life (Burr, Mutchler, & Caro, 2007; Herzog, Kahn, Morgan, Jackson, & Antonucci, 1989; Hinterlong, 2008). Participation is linked to many aspects of social and human capital, including health, social relationships, and education (Mutchler, Burr, & Caro, 2003). The productive aging literature underscores the multiple ways people contribute to their own health, to their families and communities, and to society as they age (Butler & Gleason, 1985) through participating in these activities. For example, one stream of research finds benefits for participants in productive activities through avoidance of disease and death (Burr, Tavares, & Mutchler, 2011; Glass, Mendes de Leon, Marottoli, & Berkman, 1999), although neutral or negative health consequences have been documented elsewhere, especially for productive activities with potential for high burden such as caregiving for family members with chronic illness (Schulz, Visintainer, & Williamson, 1990), caring for grandchildren (Musil et al., 2010), or employment in a physically demanding job (Fletcher, Sindelar, & Yamaguchi, 2011).
The productive activity framework has been highly successful in identifying the social, cultural, and political factors that shape the activity choices of older adults having implications for their health and well-being. Bass and Caro’s (2001) framework of productive aging embraces this multidisciplinary, dynamic perspective and highlights the influence of institutional factors. Their framework suggests that to the extent activity declines with age, such changes are associated with more than simply intrinsic motivations and preferences. Instead, institutional and societal influences—such as devaluation of elders’ contributions, excluding older participants from many roles, and the narrow range of activities considered productive—all factor into our understandings of participation. Activity choices could be modified through organizational and public policies formulated to increase the quality and quantity of productive activities; in turn, greater opportunity could positively influence public perception (Hinterlong, 2008; Morris & Bass, 1988).

Civic engagement involves action on the part of an individual, taken in support of others or for the common good (Adler & Goggin, 2005). Yet the research literature does not make clear whether “civic engagement” represents a unique cluster of ideas or, instead, a particular type of productive activity (Greenfield, 2011). A broad definition is offered in the Older Americans Act, where civic engagement is defined as “an individual or collective action designed to address a public concern or an unmet human, educational, health care, environmental, or public safety need” (U.S. Administration on Aging, 2006). The scholarly origins of civic engagement highlight activities that are civic in nature, such as voting, volunteering, or involvement in voluntary associations (Adler & Goggin, 2005), yet in much empirical work, the term is used interchangeably with “volunteering” (Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Morrow-Howell, 2010). Our discussion acknowledges this ambiguity, yet treats civic engagement as its own area of research given the rapid growth of a discrete literature on civic engagement (van den Bogaard, Henkens, & Kalmijn, 2013) much of which acknowledges little or no intellectual connection with productive or successful aging.

In the gerontological literature, conceptualization and language surrounding civic engagement share features with both productive and successful aging. The literature on civic engagement focuses on the dual benefits of activity: personal benefits realized by the participant, such as strengthened social networks and cognitive stimulation, as well as gains realized by communities via the contributions of civically engaged older participants (Hinterlong & Williamson, 2006/2007; Morrow-Howell, 2011). In this respect, the literature on civic engagement in later life integrates insights from productive aging, concerning the bases of and barriers to participation in activities, with conceptual themes from successful aging, about the benefits to personal well-being associated with public participation.

Within the field of gerontology, civic engagement shares with successful aging and productive aging a strong interpenetration of scholarship, policy, and practice. Numerous governmental, nonprofit, and academic organizations have created programs and policy statements in support of civic engagement among seniors, especially volunteering (O’Neill, Wilson, & Morrow-Howell, 2011). Freedman’s (1997) call for seniors to “save civil society” through volunteering and community engagement stems from both his acknowledgment of seniors’ human capital resources and his recognition of their potential to benefit communities and organizations. His creation of Civic Ventures (now Encore.org) focuses on mobilizing baby boomers and seniors to make contributions to their communities by transitioning to purpose-driven careers. This emphasis on purposeful work in later life, such as jobs in education and public service, highlights an important distinction between themes of civic engagement and themes of productive aging, which promotes late-life work as beneficial activity without specifying its content.

Synthesis and Critique

The literatures on successful aging, productive aging, and civic engagement offer a shared positive view of the potential embedded in later life. Each recognizes that later life can be a time of engagement, contribution, and well-being, and each cluster of literature has directed attention to determining how frequently this potential is realized. All three perspectives build to some extent on activity theory, which posits that activity promotes life satisfaction, and continuity theory, which poses that although individuals adapt to their own aging by adjusting the duration, mode, or distribution of activities, the outlines of activity maintain relatively stable over the lifecourse (Atchley, 1989; Lemon, Bengtson, & Peterson, 1972). Models have been developed and tested
to understand the factors that shape variability in the extent to which this positive aging experience is realized across individuals (Hinterlong, 2008; Romo et al., 2012); as well, literature in each cluster of work examines the implications of activity and engagement for the participant’s well-being (Glass et al., 1999; Rebok et al., 2011; Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Cohen, 2002). Indeed, the three converge most clearly when directed toward understanding well-being in later life. Rowe and Kahn’s (1998) version of successful aging defines engagement in life as an essential component of aging successfully and names participation in productive activity as one of its elements. Civic engagement—activity undertaken toward the common good by older adults—is a “public” form of productive activity (Freedman, 1997) and, as such, would be expected to signal successful aging. Indeed, scholarship in all three areas suggests that engagement in productive activities often promotes positive well-being; yet circumstances under which engagement yields neutral or negative impacts on well-being are a focus of continued investigation (Carlson et al., 2008; Matz-Costa, Besen, James, & Pitt-Catsouphes, 2012).

The perspectives diverge in the relative emphasis placed on structural and environmental issues shaping participation and well-being. Indeed, Rowe and Kahn’s work has been widely critiqued for its lack of attention to structural issues faced by aging individuals (Minkler & Fadem, 2002; Romo et al., 2012). Yet due in part to the advocacy and policy roots of productive aging and civic engagement, structural concerns are well addressed in these perspectives (Bass & Caro, 2001; O’Neill, Wilson, & Morrow-Howell, 2011). Advancing institutional support for productive activities and for civic engagement is justified not only on the basis of the larger good but also as a means of promoting opportunities for older adults to age successfully (Morrow-Howell & Freedman, 2006/2007).

Consensus and precision around fundamental issues of definition and measurement are required in all three areas of investigation, if progress is to be made in understanding the pathways to successful aging, and the broader significance of participating in activities that may be described as productive. The term “successful aging” has multiple uses in the literature—sometimes describing the characteristics of a satisfying life at older ages, and on other occasions referring to the process by which individuals can optimize well-being in later life (Martin et al., 2012). The merits of subjective measures, objective measures, or a combination of objective and subjective indicators of successful aging have been debated with little resolution (Phelan, Anderson, Lacroix, & Larson, 2004; Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, & Cartwright, 2010; Reichstadt, Sengupta, Depp, Palinkas, & Jeste, 2010; Strawbridge, Wallhagen, & Cohen, 2002). Despite agreement that productive activity includes that which is valued in society and meaningful to the individual, a lack of consensus on the precise activities defined as productive is a limitation to further theoretical development on productive aging (Bass & Caro, 2001; Sherraden, Morrow-Howell, Hinterlong, & Rozario, 2001). Morgan (1986) includes housework as productive activity, whereas Bass and Caro (2001) exclude it, for example. Greater consensus might be expected regarding the definition of civic engagement, given its more narrow scope. Yet in practice, the literature on civic engagement has struggled to maintain its definitional focus as well, frequently including not only volunteering and civic participation but also caregiving, paid work, informal helping, and other activities that have conventionally been deemed “productive” (Greenfield, 2011; van den Bogaard et al., 2013).

**Future Directions**

Scholarship at the intersection of aging and social activity has shifted from assuming withdrawal and decline to emphasizing a positive view of seniors’ contributions and potential. Advocates for older adults have long called attention to the contributions seniors make to their families and communities. Scholars have documented these contributions and secured evidence that productive behavior may benefit older participants themselves. Subsequent conceptual development advanced ideas about individual, societal, and policy factors leading to participation in productive activity while expanding scholarly thought on the interconnection of health, physical and mental functioning, and social engagement in life. Scholarship on civic engagement in later life brings renewed interest in the role of older adults in civil society and the mutual benefits resulting from participation. As promoted by successful aging models, productive activities and civic engagement are now widely embraced as potential vehicles for securing health and well-being.

Together, these streams of work invite ample future directions for scholarship. For example, a
sharpened focus on the aspects of productive or civically engaged activity that generate well-being would be beneficial. What is the “value added” by engaging in productive activities? Like many other activity choices, productive activity and civic engagement may promote social participation, physical activity, and intellectual stimulation. For example, an older adult volunteering at a local hospital may form friendships with other volunteers while simultaneously gaining cognitive and physical stimulation from transporting patients from one area of the hospital to another. Individuals participating in activities defined as productive or civically engaged may primarily benefit from them in these ways—just as they might by joining an exercise class or some leisure activity. Yet unpaid productive and civically engaged activities are defined by their sense of purpose and contribution to the well-being of others. Activities like volunteering may doubly benefit the participant through providing a sense of meaning and purpose. A significant obstacle to addressing these questions is identifying data and methods that allow the causal processes linking activity and well-being to be disentangled. Yet to sufficiently understand the value of productive activity for successful aging, these questions must be pursued.

Another future direction for research is the question of which activities may yield the most positive outcomes, and in what “dose.” Participation in productive activities has been linked with health outcomes, but the evidence is uneven: not all activities have the same benefit for older individuals (Matz-Costa et al., 2012). Productive activities that are flexibly structured and taken on by choice, such as volunteering, may have more positive implications for well-being than productive activities that are more rigidly structured, or that are more obligatory. Some productive and valued activities can be especially stressful or time consuming—caregiving for an adult with disability or caring full time for a grandchild, for example—and these may be associated with more negative health outcomes. The “dose” or level of participation, even in discretionary activities such as volunteering, is also relevant. Understanding how much participation maximizes benefit, and how much is instead burdensome to the participant, is a challenging but valued goal. Stronger theoretical development establishing the mechanisms linking activity (productive activity, civic engagement) to well-being (successful aging) is necessary to advance our understanding in this area. Future work may assist us in identifying participants in need of support or intervention before a given activity, such as caregiving, becomes harmful to health and limits activity in other beneficial areas. Causal models that specify the selective processes at work in drawing people into different types of activities, resulting in differential consequences for participation, will also be needed.

A welcomed direction for expanded research involves a specification of the aspects of well-being having the most potential to be shaped by participation in productive or civically engaged activities. Much of the literature focuses on broad well-being constructs such as life satisfaction or self-rated health. Stronger evidence about the promise and potential of participation in civically engaged or productive activities will be gained through tighter investigation of outcomes, such as measured blood pressure (Burr, Tavares, & Mutchler, 2011), or other specific health outcomes that are modifiable within relatively narrow time frames. One recent set of investigations addresses many of these issues within the context of a public health intervention. Experience Corps® is a community-based model that prospectively explores the impact of volunteering on health outcomes (Rebok et al., 2011). This NIH-funded intervention study recruits primarily low income, African American women for structured volunteer activities within the Baltimore public schools. Results provide strong evidence of the benefits of volunteering for specific health outcomes such as executive function and memory (Carlson et al., 2008); as well, the study offers an enhanced understanding of the mechanisms linking engagement to health. Additional interventions such as this are needed to establish whether increasing the number and quality of valued social roles, such as volunteering, may be an effective means of promoting successful aging—and what aspects of “success” are most amendable to intervention.

Finally, future work is needed to identify ways in which productive and civically engaged opportunities, and their benefits, may be made more accessible to all older adults who wish to participate. Each perspective has received criticism for stigmatizing people whose core activities do not mesh easily with these labels (Holstein, 1993; Martinson & Minkler, 2006; Minkler & Fadem, 2002). Recent conceptualizations may help to dissipate these critiques. Morrow-Howell and Freedman (2006/2007) assert that civic engagement has transitioned away from advocating for
the right of older people to participate in civic life, to adapting available modes of engagement so as to neither exclude nor impose upon individuals. For instance, programmatic attempts to involve people with functional limitations have been introduced in community settings (Dabelko-Schoeny, Anderson, & Spinks, 2010). An important direction for future work is devising new opportunities for engagement and productive activity, and further limiting barriers to participation (Sherraden et al., 2001).

The three interconnecting areas of research discussed in this paper direct our attention to positive locations within the matrix of late-life outcomes. Each area of study has struggled to define those locations in consistent and measurable ways, together offering a broad mix of behavior that may be understood as “productive” or “engaged,” and outcomes that may be deemed as evidence of “success” or “well-being.” Yet the goal of identifying activities—modifiable allocations of time—that have the potential to not only enhance a participant’s likelihood of aging successfully but also benefit others in the process is too alluring to dismiss. The development of a positive gerontology signaled by these three intersecting approaches offers a welcome reminder of the potential embedded within aging societies.

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