

Theorizing about Aging Well: Constructing a Narrative*

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RÉSUMÉ

On redécouvre le concept de la vieillesse réussie. Ce récent regain d'intérêt s'inscrit dans une recherche menée depuis 50 ans. Les conceptualisations contradictoires entourant la vieillesse réussie nous amènent à examiner certaines des hypothèses sur lesquelles repose le concept. Par l'entremise du développement d'une « théorie narrative de la vieillesse réussie », l'auteur cerne une hypothèse fondamentale des cadres conceptuels passés : bien vieillir est la réalisation de l'auto-intégration de certains ensembles de ressources ou de certaines formes d'engagement. L'auteur explique que les récentes théories en matière de vieillesse réussie sont influencées par l'intérêt croissant pour la recherche de sens au troisième âge. Il existe, à l'heure actuelle, un nouveau courant de pensée selon lequel la vieillesse réussie consiste à négocier la coconstruction et la reconstruction de plusieurs sois dans un processus continu et ouvert de recherche de sens à travers les événements et transitions du troisième âge. L'article offre en conclusion des pistes pour la recherche future.

ABSTRACT

Aging well is new, again. The recent interest is part of a 50-year period of research. Contradictory conceptualizations of aging well create an opportunity to consider assumptions that underlie the concept. In this paper, through the construction of an aging-well, theorizing narrative, an underlying assumption is identified in past aging-well conceptual frameworks: to age well is to achieve self-integration in relation to particular sets of resources or forms of engagement. The narrative relates how more recent aging-well theorizing is being shaped by a growing interest in later-life meaning-making. Evidence is presented of a contemporary shift toward describing aging well as the negotiation of the co-construction and reconstruction of multiple selves in an ongoing, open-ended process of meaning-making amid later-life events and transitions. The paper concludes with implications for future research.

* I thank Norah Keating for her invaluable mentorship; my committee members; and the helpful comments of the anonymous reviewers. I also thank Hyekyong Choi, Kees Knipscheer, and Clare Wenger for their insightful thoughts on earlier drafts. This paper was written with the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship.

Manuscript received: / manuscrit reçu : 12/06/03

Manuscript accepted: / manuscrit accepté : 11/02/04

Mots clés: bien vieillir; théorie narrative; narration/récit; intégré; sois

Keywords: aging well; theorizing; narrative; integrated; selves

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Introduction

Aging well is new, again. The past decade has seen a great deal of research energy focused on the nature of aging well (see, for example, whole and part issues of journals dedicated to the subject: *Journal of Social Issues*, Winter 2002; *Clinics in Geriatric*

Medicine, August 2002; *The Gerontologist*, October 2001). Yet societal concern about aging well has been a subject of interest for some time (Strong-Boag, 1988, pp. 180–181). Indeed, theorizing about the nature of aging well has been part of gerontological discourse for more than 50 years (Havighurst, 1961; Hendricks & Achenbaum, 1999; Lawton, 1946). Given this long

history, it is perhaps not surprising that we enter the twenty-first century with a large body of literature with often contradictory ideas about this phenomenon – that aging well is about the graceful withdrawal from society; having the good fortune to have resources to remain engaged; making personal meaning of later life; and so on. The purpose of this paper is to address this apparent conceptual disparity by constructing a narrative of aging-well theorizing to make sense of the past in order to provide a point of reference for future work.

Some would argue that aging well is an offensive concept because it suggests that some individuals age poorly, as though aging could be a personal failure (Hepworth, 1995; Holstein, 2000; Katz, 2000; Scheidt & Humpherys, 1999). Such an objection comes from those who believe that if aging well is the possession of resources for behaving in particular ways, those who lack these resources or the opportunities to acquire them may be marginalized by the use of this concept (Biggs, 2001; Holstein, 2000). However, it also has been argued that the concept is useful because it moves gerontology away from a focus on dependency, frailty, and general misery and suggests positive, resourceful images of later life with an emphasis on older adults' assets and abilities (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Tornstam, 1992). The many terms used in the literature reflect various conceptual approaches used in understanding these assets: successful aging, healthy aging, active aging, productive aging, and optimal aging. Still, it must be recognized that uncritical use of these positive aging terms can obscure the legitimacy of other ways of aging (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003; Hepworth, 1995; Holstein, 2000). That such a debate and various constructions of aging well exist is understandable, considering that frameworks are products of their time and of their theorists, who are situated within their own lives, careers, and societies (Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Tosh, 2000).

Stepping into the debate, this paper suggests that aging well is a concept worth clarifying for three reasons. First, by turning attention to individuals' assets rather than exclusively focusing on deficits, the concept has the potential to reject the assumption that aging is a personal and societal problem (Hepworth, 1995). Second, use of the concept has been prescriptive. Rather than simply describing *how* individuals age, much work has been focused on how individuals *should* age (Hepworth, 1995; Holstein, 2000; Katz, 2000). While the prescriptive use of the concept can be marginalizing, if it is clarified, *aging well* can be a term that is inclusive and descriptive. Third, past theorizing about aging well may no longer resonate with current and upcoming cohorts of older adults.

The ways that individuals make sense of later life are many (Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, & Robinson, 1999; Katz, 2000). The argument of this paper is that the concept of aging well has merit for encompassing *how*, in diverse ways, individuals make sense of changing levels of resources and engagement amid the life-course transitions and events that characterize later life.

This paper constructs a narrative of aging-well theorizing. Turning to the past provides opportunities to consider what we previously have believed and to examine what we have come to take for granted in our interpretations of a phenomenon (Kenyon, Ruth, & Mader, 1999; Smith, 1991; Tosh, 2000). A narrative creates "a context by connecting what seems unrelated into a story" (Berkhofer, 1995, p. 37). Whether a narrative is that of an individual's life course or of a broader societal story through time, the construction of a narrative is a way of knowing or understanding (Polkinghorne, 1996). The process of construction is an opportunity to reflect on past and current thought. In the narrative constructed in this paper, self or identity is a key construct. As will be demonstrated, some theorists have framed aging well as an ideal mix of personal resources and types of engagement evident in the achievement of self-integration. This integrated self has been taken for granted as an aging-well end-state. However, other theorists have begun to describe aging well as an open-ended process evident in individuals' ongoing negotiation of multiple selves amid changing levels of resources and engagement and amid the life-course transitions and events that characterize later life.

This narrative of aging-well theorizing is presented in three parts. The crafting of the narrative begins with a consideration of past aging-well theorizing and how the pursuit of self-integration has been an underlying point of reference. Then, attention is turned to the manner in which research based on a negotiated-selves perspective is emerging. From this perspective, aging well is described as a process in which individuals in context make positive meaning through an ongoing, open-ended negotiation of multiple selves amid later-life change. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications of this shift in theorizing for future research.

Narrative Part One: In Pursuit of Self-Integration

Gerontological theorizing has been characterized by a belief that the ideal self is an integrated self, a developmental end-state characterized by personal coherence and centredness. Such self-integration is

evident in Erikson's development model, which is informed by the following assumption:

The word *I*, then, in all languages, is the verbal assurance that each of us is a center of awareness in the center of the universe, and this with the sense of a coherent and continuous identity; in other words, we are alive and aware of it....

continuous rather than scattered

indivisible rather than divided

inclusive rather than isolated and excluded

safely bounded rather than invaded or evading

chosen rather than bypassed

etc. (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 52)

The frequency with which Erikson's (1963) model is cited in aging studies (for example, Kuhl & Westwood, 2001; McAdams, 1996; Wong, 2000) is a hint of the reliance of gerontological thought on this developmental perspective. However, a concern with an integrated self is not specific to that perspective; a coherence of self also informs the interactionist tradition. For example, although Mead (1934, p. 142) suggested that individuals have multiple selves, as many selves as social relationships, he also argued that they come together as "the complete, unitary self" (p. 144), in the entirety of individuals social interactions. An individual's self-concept develops until it becomes stable, not unlike the description by Erikson et al. (1986, p. 52) of indivisibility and safe boundedness. According to Mead (p. 143), individuals seek to protect the self-concept from forces that would destabilize it. It seems that, despite Erikson's and Mead's dramatically different perspectives, an underlying assumption of self-integration is common to both. Just as these perspectives have influenced gerontology in general, so too, as it will be argued in this paper, has this key assumption informed theorizing about aging well.

Six frameworks are discussed that often are presented as aging-well conceptualizations in gerontological discourse (for example, in Martin, 2002; McPherson, 1998, pp. 78–81, 158; Nussbaum, Pecchioni, Robinson, & Thompson, 2000, pp. 7–16). The frameworks are Activity Theory (Havighurst, 1961), Disengagement Theory (Cumming & Henry, 1961), Socio-environmental Theory (Gubrium, 1973), Continuity Theory (Atchley, 1971, 1989), the Selective Optimization with Compensation Model (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), and the Successful Aging Model (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). This group is not inclusive of past theorizing about aging well. Nonetheless, these frameworks represent oft-cited work, with sets of assumptions about the nature of aging well.

This paper presents a narrative rather than a comprehensive review of theories. Thus, the nature and chronological path of theorizing are considered, the frameworks are considered relative to each other and in the broader context of society, and the key assumption of self-integration is highlighted.

In the 1940s and 1950s in the emerging field of social gerontology, the place of older adults in society was a concern, as retirement was becoming institutionalized as an expected life phase (Blaikie, 1999, p. 59; Cavan, Burgess, Havighurst, & Goldhamer, 1949, p. 31). Theorists were concerned with how aging happened and what was to be done with older adults who were living long enough to retire (Parsons, 1960). A theory of the aging process was developing, but it was only explicitly labelled Activity Theory after the Disengagement Theory was proposed during the Kansas City Studies of Aging (Gubrium, 1973, p. 17; Havighurst, 1961; Marshall, 1999). Since this early phase, the idea of aging well has been debated. Even within the Kansas City program of research, theoretical differences were clear (Marshall). Yet both Activity Theory and Disengagement Theory were based on an underlying assumption that self-integration was required to age well.

Activity Theory

Advocates of Activity Theory equated retirement with involuntary withdrawal from society and directed retirees, assumed to be men, to substitute other roles for paid work roles, to remain effective and integrated in society (Havighurst, Neugarten, & Tobin, 1964; Lawton, 1943). To age well was to retain and adapt activities from highly engaged mid-life years in order to remain socially engaged (Havighurst, 1961; Cavan et al., 1949, pp. 11, 16). The higher the level of activity maintained by older adults, the more positive would be the mood and general level of personal adjustment (Cavan et al., pp. 75–90; Havighurst et al.). It is clear from contemporary writing that concern lay not only with individuals but also with society. Cavan et al. noted that an individual was expected to respond "to a new situation in such a way as to integrate the expression of his [*sic*] aspirations with the expectations and demands of society" (p. 11). Yet even as retirees were conceptualized as "active participants in a democracy" (Lawton, 1946, p. viii) fulfilling the interests of society (McMullin & Marshall, 1999), Activity Theory presented individuals who were aging well as "well-integrated personalities" (Havighurst et al. p. 424). In other words, to age well was to integrate not only one's self relative to past and present roles but also one's self with societal norms, as a vital but stable contributor to society.

Disengagement Theory

According to Disengagement Theory, aging well was the mutual withdrawal of society and individuals: "The very old person, if he [*sic*] can still perform some tasks, is rewarded, but primarily he is expected to *be* rather than to *do*, to maintain his equilibrium, to symbolize the past rather than to change and learn and create a new history" (Cumming & Henry, 1961, pp. 222–223). This meant that for individuals to age well they should cease to be involved in productive activity or extensive social interaction. Indeed, withdrawal was understood as universal and the path to high morale (Cumming & Henry, pp. 211–218). Rather than being public contributors, individuals who were aging well were thought to restrict their social interaction to immediate friends and family and the private sphere. To maintain sufficient individual resources was to be able to afford withdrawal that, in turn, helped fulfil a role in the survival of society. Yet, as with Activity Theory, the Disengagement theorists argued that individuals who aged well became "more intensely individual" (Cumming & Henry, p. 96), or self-centred. This suggests that this second framework also was grounded on an underlying assumption that self-integration had been achieved by those who aged well.

Socio-environmental Theory

In the 1960s and 1970s, Socio-environmental theorists responded to the Activity and Disengagement debate by shifting the theoretical focus from framing aging well in relation to the interests of society to conceptualizing individuals as agents. In the present narrative, agency is understood as the "capacity for and exercise of choice" (Marshall, 1999, p. 439). From a concern for older adults' social integration, Rosow (1967, pp. 10, 20, 29–30) argued that as older adults lost previous societal roles, such as paid work careers, they generally increased their interaction in local social contexts. To age well in Socio-environmental theory was to have sufficient "activity resources" of health, financial solvency, and social support to be able to respond to expectations of these social contexts (Gubrium, 1973, pp. 38–39). Similarly, in Lawton et al.'s conceptualization, "individual competences" included physical, psychological, and cognitive health and "ego strength" (Lawton, 1982, p. 38; Lawton & Nahemow, 1973).

Local, age-heterogeneous social contexts were perceived as more demanding in terms of societal contributions than age-homogeneous contexts (Gubrium, 1973, pp. 43–44). If individuals did not have sufficient levels of activity resources or competences, a lack of fit with the demands

or "environmental press" would result in low morale and maladaptive aging (Lawton & Nahemow, 1973). Lawton's (1982, 1986, p. 14) term *ego strength* suggests that the ability of individuals to find a best fit was dependent, in part, on a strong sense of self. Their coherence of self informed their agency, enabling them to choose to comply with societal norms, ignore them, or move across social contexts to settings in which they were better equipped to cope (Gubrium, p. 48). The appearance of agency in the aging-well theorizing narrative foreshadowed current thinking about ongoing, open-ended negotiation of selves that depends on agency.

Continuity Theory

Whereas Activity and Disengagement theorists argued that their respective types of aging well required aging in balance with society, Continuity theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s assumed that aging well was a personal evolution. They described older adults as aging well by gradually and meaningfully adapting to change according to a consistent sense of self (Atchley, 1971). Here, again, agency makes an appearance in the narrative in the form of individuals strategically creating "coherent pictures of the past and link[ing] the past to a purposeful, *integrated present*" (Atchley, 1989, p. 187; italics added). The past was conceptualized as a resource, informing and influencing adaptation. Individuals were understood in context, not only being passively influenced by but also actively drawing upon their present goals and societal expectations (Atchley, 1989). Individuals sought levels of engagement in the present and future similar to past patterns, with the aim of protecting and maintaining self-concept by reinterpreting it over time. At this point in the narrative, the concept of meaning-making also begins to appear, in the sense that individuals are reflecting on who they have been and continue to be. The use of the descriptor *continuity* recalls the use by Erikson et al. (1986, p. 52) of *continuous* to describe ego, a suggestion of the underlying assumption of self-integration in Continuity Theory. In this framework, aging well entailed pursuit of self-integration, but it was achieved through consistency of self rather than through the substitution of activities (Activity Theory), withdrawal (Disengagement Theory), or changing of contexts (Socio-environmental Theory).

Selective Optimization with Compensation

The narrative turns next to the Selective Optimization with Compensation (SOC) Model. By the 1980s, theorists were building on earlier theorists' recognition of individuals' interdependent relationships with social contexts and on the premise that individuals

seek to age in ways consistent with past selves. In the SOC Model, individuals aged well when they strategically accommodated changing levels of resources by modifying their interactions with their physical and social contexts (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). That individuals were conceptualized as agents is evident in the framework's prescriptive air: individuals were capable of and should manage their changing personal resources amid later-life events and transitions. This management could occur by compensating for such change. "The central task will be to assist individuals in acquiring effective strategies involving changes in aspirations and the scope of goals" (Baltes & Baltes, 1990, p. 20). For example, aging well was evident in individuals' strategic investment or optimization of socio-emotional resources in some social relationships rather than others (Carstensen, 1991). To have relationships with a wide variety of people was perceived as less functional in later life than to maintain intimate interactions with a few key individuals. Through those specific, predictable, and supportive relationships, individuals could better use their resources to maintain self-concept (Carstensen). In this framework, agency in context was central to achieving and protecting a consistent self over time.

Model of Successful Aging

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Model of Successful Aging by its very title claimed for itself pre-eminence as the way to age well. As has been observed (Gee & Gutman, 2000), Western society had become increasingly concerned about population aging and society's ability to support an assumed dependency among older adults. If individuals could not prevent age-related loss and maintain physical and mental resources, they could not continue to be engaged. If they could not be engaged, presumably they could not age well and were a burden to society. While this framework has been embraced in the popular media, it also has provoked objections to its potentially marginalizing criteria for "success" (Scheidt & Humpherys, 1999). To age well, individuals were to lead lives that avoided disability and disease, and thereby maintain mental and physical capacities that facilitated productive and social engagement in society (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). Individuals' agency was framed not only in terms of responsibility to themselves, but also to society. Disengagement was rejected. Active engagement was advocated. Implicitly, this prescriptive framework assumed that individuals should prolong the viability of their resources and engagement to avoid loss of self through pathological aging. This assumption was congruent with the belief that aging well was

associated with the pursuit of a centred, cohesive self, yet, as with early theorizing, in the interests of society.

By comparing key conceptual frameworks, the narrative of aging-well theorizing begins to emerge. Researchers sought to determine the "right" mix of resources and engagement as sets of assets with which individuals could age well. Each framework also was a recipe for achieving an integrated self in later life. According to Activity Theory, if individuals did not have the minimum levels of physical and mental resources, then presumably they were not socially active, suffered emotionally, and thus could not achieve self-integration nor fulfil the interests of society. In Disengagement Theory, physical, mental, and socio-economic resources were critical to the choice to withdraw from extensive social engagement and to become more self-centred. In Socio-environmental Theory, without health, financial solvency, and social support, individuals could not meet social expectations, and thus high levels of morale and personal coherence were out of reach. In Continuity Theory, without the cognitive ability to reinterpret the past, individuals could not protect self-concept. According to the SOC Model, individuals were encouraged to invest and optimize available mental, physical, and social resources strategically to maintain self-concept. Finally, according to the Successful Aging Model, individuals were expected to assume responsibility for maintaining mental and physical functional capacities toward retaining self and being socially and productively engaged. The thread of maintaining the "right" mix of resources and engagement in the narrative reflects a concern with later-life instrumentality. The underlying assumption of the pursuit of self-integration suggests a concern with bringing individuals' multiple selves under control into a coherent whole.

In addition to the emphasis on various forms of an integrated self, a second thread in the aging-well narrative is evident in this early theorizing. Over time, frameworks became increasingly explicit about the place of individual agency as it informed individuals' management of aging. This evolution mirrored a growing interest in social gerontological theorizing in understanding how older adults perceive and make choices relative to the contexts in which they live (McMullin & Marshall, 1999). This agency continues to have a role in the narrative constructed in this paper. Next, the narrative continues with the explication of the emerging assumption that a key theme in aging well is the active negotiation of multiple selves in an ongoing, open-ended, and meaningful fashion.

Narrative Part Two: Negotiating Multiple Selves

In this second part of the narrative, the paper demonstrates how gerontological theorizing is shifting from a view that aging well is the achievement of self-integration relative to particular sets of resources or forms of engagement. This section begins by discussing how gerontologists are describing aging well as the ongoing co-construction and reconstruction of multiple selves as an open-ended process of meaning-making amid later-life events and transitions.

In recent years, as some researchers have observed, the usefulness of the concept of an integrated self is being questioned, and arguments are being made that individuals have multiple selves that cannot be resolved into a single entity (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 13). Selves have long been understood as day-to-day constructions of interpretation, through introspective self-meaning and social interaction with others (Bruner, 2003; Mead, 1934, p. 142). However, issues of plurality of life-course experiences, contradictory constructions of "old age," technological innovations, and changes in the meaning of time and space in society combine to influence individuals' efforts to keep up with these selves as they multi-task and juggle paid and unpaid work (Holstein & Gubrium, pp. 3, 10). Bernard, Chambers, and Granville (2000) observe that such conflicting demands are of special relevance to women. "As women, we are having to deal with a great number of complex and often contradictory messages about who we are, what we should be doing and how we should be dealing with growing older" (p. 7). Yet the concept of self remains a vital contemporary concept, evident in the societal anxiety that surrounds a fear of the loss of self through frailty and dependence (Basting, 2003; Herzog & Markus, 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, pp. 4, 80).

Rather than the concept of self, it is the pursuit of an integrated self that may no longer fit current society. In a longitudinal case analysis, Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson (1999) ask, "What happens after the achievement of 'integrity'?" (p. 827). They find that Erikson's (1963) developmental stages may describe some individuals' experiences but that other individuals live long enough to look beyond the achievement of ego integrity; and still others may not perceive life as a coherent, integrated story (Coleman et al., 1993, 1999). Not all individuals feel the need to achieve wisdom or to resolve life stories by seeking or granting forgiveness (Black, 2003; Woodward, 2003). Black observes, "There is no one way for elders to forgive, just as there is no way [*sic*] one way for old

people to live or to age" (p. 35). Some would go so far as to say that to associate resolution or detached wisdom with later life may be considered ageist and limiting (Woodward).

A contemporary theme in this aging-well narrative is that older adults may frame their life meaning as a story. Rather than assuming a clear plot, this conceptualization of story is an open-ended and strategic process in which goals are continuing to be set amid later-life changes (Coleman et al., 1999). Bruner (2003) writes, "Self-making through self-narrating is restless and endless" (p. 221). This process, too, is inherently social, as negotiation occurs not only with one's selves but also with other people (Bruner). The social elements of negotiating selves are perhaps apparent in a particular way in later life, considering that the majority of older adults are women. It has been suggested that "life assumes its richest moments in relationships, and women, the dominant group among the old, do not easily conform to the social contract myth, that the individual is essentially solitary, bound to others only through self-interested free choice" (Fahey & Holstein, 1993, p. 249). Rather than an introspective pursuit of self-integration, aging well may be an open-ended negotiation of the co-construction of multiple selves.

A key dimension of this theorizing narrative is a life-course perspective (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Aging well may entail making meaning over time about past, present, and future selves (Kitwood, 1997, p. 135; Sabat & Harré, 1992). The manner in which individuals negotiate their selves is influenced by major events and transitions, like retirement, widowhood, or downsizing, and by increasing frailty. Even though individuals may no longer be involved in some previous roles, like that of paid worker, the selves associated with those roles may remain meaningful as they are reconstructed or modified (Kitwood, pp. 80, 136; Sabat & Harré). Individuals actively negotiate their various identities as they deal with day-to-day issues, one context and one relationship at a time, yet amid multiple contexts and dimensions of time (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, pp. 95, 224).

A second theme in this theorizing narrative is that individuals' ongoing negotiation of selves occurs amid diminishing levels of resources. Research on personhood and dementia illustrates this view. A story shared by an individual with dementia may appear incoherent from a self-integration perspective. However, researchers are demonstrating that "despite verbal communicative deficits and cognitive impairments, older people with dementia use and interpret nonverbal behaviour in their determination, and struggle to remain part of the communicative world"

(Hubbard, Cook, Tester, & Downs, 2002, p. 163). If listeners actively engage the fragmented threads of the story, and recognize the storyteller as a person with values, preferences, and needs, then the storyteller and listener construct or modify an overall narrative and thus selves, specific to the experiences related (Kitwood, 1997, pp. 8, 136; Sabat & Harré, 1992). Though speaking in fragments or gestures, such storytellers are “expressing selfhood” (Basting, 2003, p. 97). They continue to create personal meaning, positioning themselves with their listeners, and may make positive meaning of negative life experiences (Hubbard et al.; Sabat & Harré; Usita, Hyman, & Herman, 1998). If aging well is conceptualized as ongoing and open-ended rather than as an integrated end-state, individuals with dementia may be aging well moment-to-moment because they continue to co-construct multiple selves in meaningful ways. Still, it must be recognized that, at other times, individuals may not be able to make positive meaning amid later-life changes and thus are not aging well. Yet, “A frail person may not *have* health, family, money, or cognitive competence. Nevertheless, that person may *be* in the sense of hopefulness, coping, acceptance, and transcendence” (Kenyon, 1991, p. 31). Aging well may be about the meaningful negotiation of selfhood, rather than particular levels of resources that might allow for an ideal type of societal engagement.

Aging well is a complex, dynamic process. As resources, engagement, and contexts change over time, when individuals make personal sense of multiply located selves and are comfortable with their plurality rather than seeking to centralize and synchronize them, such individuals would appear to be aging well. Such personal meaning is illustrated by contentment (Fisher, 1992; Nilsson, Ekman, & Sarvimäki, 1998; Wenger, 1997). It is evident in the achievement of a best fit of personal needs, values, and preferences, and experiences in various contexts (Eales, Keating, & Damsma, 2001). Individuals who are aging well manage to find a fit between their resources and societal demands in ways that result in new meaning about some part of their selves (Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Wong, 2000). Aging well, then, is an ability to live with the juxtaposition of one self against another, without need to achieve closure, completion, or integration, but assuming open-endedness in the ongoing co-construction of selves (Bruner, 2003; Coleman et al., 1999; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 215).

Continuing the Narrative

This paper is a moment in an ongoing narrative. From the construction of this narrative, it is clear that

past theorizing has been grounded in an implicit belief that to age well was to achieve self-integration in relation to particular sets of resources or forms of engagement. Yet over time, theorists increasingly have focused on individuals’ agency in dealing with changes in those resources and engagement. The narrative shows that theorists are turning their interest to older adults’ making sense of these changes through their ongoing, open-ended negotiation of selves in later life.

What lies ahead? It may be that the next chapter in the narrative of aging-well theorizing will lie in further understanding the place of meaning-making in and about the negotiation of selves (Berman, 2000; Dittmann-Kohli, 1990; Ovrebo & Minkler, 1993; Wong, 1989, 2000). One example of movement in this direction is work by Harper (1997). Her feminist perspective focuses the theoretical lens on gender and past concern with retaining later-life instrumentality through the control of the body. She argues that the past attention to personal resources, later-life independence, and productivity was situated within a field dominated by men in the mid-twentieth century seeking to master and reduce the effects of aging on (men’s) bodies. A new direction for the narrative may be to understand the shift in theorizing in terms of a gendered recognition of the role of meaning-making in aging well. Considering that social constructions of gender influence how individuals construct their selves (Cross & Madson, 1997), a second worthy direction for the narrative is the consideration that aging-well experiences may themselves be gendered. Researchers might turn to study how older adults make meaning of, for example, their changing instrumentality, and how that differs by gender.

The tracing of an aging-well theorizing narrative is useful because it prompts re-evaluation and the recognition of the situatedness of theory over time. From a storyline about self-integration as an end-state, to one about an open-ended negotiation of selves amid change, to one that may emerge about teasing apart the nature of the meaning made of this negotiation, this narrative construction creates an opportunity to look back and observe these shifts. This narrative is and will continue to be a product of historical time, societal dynamics, and theorists’ positions in those contexts.

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