

A review of aging literature: looking for more than decline

Abstract

Decline models of aging remain dominant in much of gerontological research and theory and in the professional practice in aged care. The emphasis, even in the most positive approaches to successful aging, is on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and delaying the inevitable decline for as long as possible. There is little recognition of the potential for personal growth. This review identifies the gap in recent literature and argues for a more nuanced model of aging.

Keywords: models of aging, decline and growth

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Jenny Onyx,¹ Carol Wexler²

¹University Technology Sydney, Australia

²Tel Aviv University, Israel

Correspondence: Jenny Onyx, University Technology Sydney, Australia, Tel +61 2 9514 3979, Email Jenny.onyx@uts.edu.au

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Introduction

Decline models of aging remain dominant in much of the professional practice in aged care. The emphasis, even in the most positive approaches to successful aging, is on maintaining a healthy lifestyle and delaying the inevitable decline for as long as possible. There is little recognition of the potential for personal growth. This paper briefly reviews the current literature that illustrates this emphasis on decline. It then identifies some findings that suggest the potential for new challenges and personal growth well beyond retirement. We argue that while decline occurs, that is only part of the story of aging. The potential for personal including cognitive growth remains a gap in current gerontological research and theory.

Discussion

The decline in physiological and cognitive functioning with aging is well documented, as evidenced throughout the recent 2015 Handbook of Theories of Aging (3rd edition) and other landmark research publications. These include¹⁻⁴ of particular relevance is the important series of Seattle longitudinal studies. Schaie² in reviewing the evidence notes: These [longitudinal] studies generally find less behavioural decrement than would be suggested by cross-sectional data: only small average decline in the 60's with increasingly steep decrement for each successive decade....But some characteristics identify groups of individuals who show greater and lesser decline.... Schaie.² Here there is a growing recognition of the heterogeneity in aging. Nonetheless, there is no expectation that at least for some cohorts there may actually be an increase in functioning. Much of the current discussion within gerontology has focused on the nature of "successful ageing". Rowe & Kahn's⁵ biomedical oriented 'successful' ageing model stresses the avoidance of disease and disability, maintaining high mental and physical functioning, and remaining socially engaged. The emphasis is on medical interventions and positions older people as responsible for engaging in exercise, diet and social engagement prescriptions to produce good health.⁶

The work of Baltes and his colleagues⁷ has been particularly influential in shifting the emphasis from decline to a more nuanced analysis of Lifespan Development, involving processes of selective optimization with compensation. This involves maximizing desirable goals or outcomes and minimizing losses. Hertzog et al.⁸ take this further, arguing that under certain conditions, training can enhance

the older persons' cognitive capacity, returning it to previous levels. Again there is no suggestion of growth. Even the emerging literature on wisdom, supposedly the prerogative of older people, suggests little evidence of new acquisition of wisdom beyond midlife.⁹

Most standard research on aging takes an objective position, treating the aging person as object. However, there is some evidence of a recent shift towards understanding aging from a person centric position. This shift involves the concept of "resilience" in later life.¹⁰ For Aldwin & Igarashi¹¹ the aim is to fulfil 3 goals: "Maintaining optimal functioning, developing a comfortable way of life, developing a sense of purpose." Both hedonic and eudemonic aspects of life are included in this approach: positive feelings of well-being as well as having a sense of purpose, mastery and accomplishment.¹²⁻¹⁵

While the majority of studies assume that few older people begin new activities in retirement, this does not reflect the reality. Nimrod¹⁶ has developed innovation theory to identify potentially new and creative approaches post retirement. The use of the internet, itself evidence of new cognitive capacity, has greatly enabled new and creative activities in the aged.^{17,18} The senior tourism literature also identifies a range of creative approaches to retirement. Some, but not all retirees clearly focus on new experiences, seeking intellectual enrichment and new learning.^{19,20}

One current research employs a feminist collective approach to explore the experience of aging among a cohort of older professional women.²¹ They found, as did Rajan & Rajan,²² that aging entails a great deal of new learning, engaging in new "careers" including the exploration of creative arts activities, and new projects that have received wider public recognition. The concept of "lifelong learning" appears to be far more appropriate in describing the aging experience of these older people.

Conclusion

While some decline certainly occurs in the aging process, this is only part of the story of aging. Certainly, in the decades immediately after retirement, say the 60s and 70s, there is growing clinical and incidental evidence that aging is more marked by a sense of freedom and opportunities to explore new learning and new challenges. This seems to be the case until the final, often brief decline towards death. We need far more research into the capacity for cognitive and personal growth over the last few decades of life. It is likely that rates of both

growth and decline may vary for different cohorts. It is crucial that research captures both an objective analysis, but importantly also a more person-centric voice of older people themselves. Such research will produce a more nuanced model of aging, which should flow into more enlightened policy settings and facilities to maximize growth opportunities.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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