The Ageing Self in an Environment of Ageing

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Propositions from Life Span Theory

Development entails:
- a dynamic between biology and culture
- allocation of resources to distinct functions
  - growth vs maintenance vs regulation of loss
  - gain/loss dynamics
- ontogenetic and historical contextualism as guiding paradigm.

The Ageing Self

- Essence of you
  - Self-esteem*: affective (feeling)
  - Self-concept: cognitive (thinking)
- Dynamic adaptation processes develop it
  - Perceived (or Expected) Control*
  - Selective Optimisation with Compensation
- Resources* - enhance or maintain wellbeing

The Ageing Environment

- Home & Family (Informal)
- Work (Formal)
  - Aged Care
    - Palliative Care
    - Home Care
    - Personal Care Worker
- In both, we pursue Instrumental and Socioemotional Goals

Competence and Environmental Press: Lawton & Nahemow

- Competence
  - upper limit of functional capacity
  - e.g., Cognitive and Self capacities (or resources)
- Environmental press
  - demands the situation or circumstances place on people
  - e.g., Interpersonal or Social pressures (modes or expectations of care or carers)

Competence & Environmental Press

Competence & Environmental Press: Adaptation levels (Lawton & Nahemow, cont.)

- **points of balance** between environmental press and level of competence
- level of adaptive functioning in an environment depends on the level of competence at a particular level of environmental press
- implications of model:
  - less competent a person is, the more impact the environment has
  - More stressful the environment, more competence is required to deal with it

Ageism & Well-being

![Figure 1](image-url). The rejection-identification model and estimated parameters for older adults. All of the estimated path weights are standardized. *p < .05.


Self-Concept

Cognitive Models of Personality

- our view of our self is core of personality
  - schema = dynamic working model of reality
  - organises behaviour, via self-understanding and self-regulation
- social phenomenon, growing from interactions with others
- Whitbourne - identity style


Self Resources

- recent elaboration of notion of reserves or buffers or moderators of various outcomes
- In realm of psychological well-being self-esteem & perceived control
  (Thoits, M. Baltes, Lange, J. Smith)
- Contribute to
  - Personal growth or modification of self-image
  - Maintenance or resilience
  - Regulation of loss or coping
  - Overall positive affect

Self-esteem

- Worthiness, ie., the individual’s positive or negative attitude toward the self as a totality
  (Rosenberg et al., 1995)

  *I feel I have a number of good qualities. I take a positive attitude towards myself.*

  - “almost always true“(1) ... “never true”(5)
  - higher scores indicate stronger self-esteem
**Perceived Control**

- Autonomy - degree to which one expects control of significant events in everyday life (Reid & Ziegler, 1981)
  
  You spend your time doing what you want to do. You spend your time doing what you want to do. You spend your time doing what you want to do. You spend your time doing what you want to do.

- "strongly agree" (1) ... "strongly disagree" (5)
- higher scores indicate greater expectancy of control

**ALSA Findings**

Community Dwelling Older Adults (70-103)

- After taking account of gender, marital cognitive, depressive, and health status, self resources contribute to overall Morale
  
  You are satisfied with your life these days? You are satisfied with your life these days? You are satisfied with your life these days? You are satisfied with your life these days?

  You have a lot to be happy about.


**Ego Integrity (Acceptance)**

- Acceptance – defined as
  
  – If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing
  
  – So far, I have gotten the important things I want in life

- Strongly related to positive and negative affect, indexed as Morale and Depression

- A cousin of disengagement and passivity?

  Ranzijn & Luszcz (1999). Acceptance: A key to Well-being in Older Adults, Australian Psychologist, 34, 94-98.

**Gero-transcendence**

- A natural developmental process

  "new feeling of cosmic communion with the spirit of the universe, a redefinition of time and space, life and death and a redefinition of self."

  3 levels – cosmic, self, relationships


Problems, Pitfalls & Pressures in Aged Care

Wadensten & Carlsson Study (2001)

- Gerontological care is \textit{consciously} influenced by theoretical assumptions about old age (p.636)
  - Erikson's Stages - Integrity
  - Activity – often basis for Aged Care
    - Activity and social interaction valued
    - Role losses experienced negatively by older people and XX needs to be ‘substituted’ for them

Gerotranscendence as Alternative

- Cousin of Disengagement
  - mutual social and affective withdrawal
  - Socio-emotional Selectivity
    - Narrowing of social world and decreasing investment in activities that previously were important
    - Older adults regard emotional information as more salient than younger adults do

Gerotranscendence (Wadensten & Carlsson, 2001)

- New way to
  - view transition into old age
  - ways in which very old can accept losses
  - interpret behaviour (or lack thereof) of residents in aged care
- Do nursing staff recognize signs of Gerotranscendence among residents?

The Study

- Qualitative structured interview
- 34 staff, aged 20 to 59
- Care recipients \( \geq 65 \) years of age
- Mixed aetiology, chronic illness, disabilities, a few with dementia

Sample Interview Items

- Do you recognise ... in behaviours in some old people:
- ... discovery of new aspects of themselves
- ... not caring much about bodily changes of ageing
- ... considerable reflection on childhood
- ... reflection on lives and reports of understanding various events and episodes in different light as growing older

Results - Cosmic level

- Many interpreted as \textit{pathological}
  - changed perception of time and space, seen as sign of incipient dementia or confusion
  - capacity to rejoice in small things – reflected non-eventfulness of their live
  - Dealt with by bringing back to present or providing ‘stimulating’ activities
- Supernatural explanations were seen as \textit{normal} based on cultural or life experience that discounted purely rational explanations
Results - Self Level

- Invisible signs of ageing, scarcely noticed
  - ego-integrity, self-confrontation, less self-centeredness
- Normal signs of Ageing
  - Rediscovery of child-within – pleasant memories; working through (ego-integrity)
  - Bodily-transcendence

Interpretations

- Pathological attributions may stem from little access to theoretical tools that would give rise to other interpretations
- Ageism or implicit stereotypes
- Care would be facilitated if staff had basic understanding of theory of gerotranscendence

Implications

- Conflict can arise between wishes/goals of staff and resident if some of common behaviours are not considered acceptable
- Put sense of control in jeopardy – resident may try to adjust to staff expectations and experience adverse affective consequences, lowered self-esteem
- Instrumental values/goals of staff may negate those of residents who place primacy on personal emotional ones

Conclusion

- Caregivers need a conceptual framework to interpret and understand individual ageing
- Knowledge of gerotranscendence may change the attitude of staff toward what is considered normal ageing
- Confronting one’s own ageing while providing care to those closer to death can pose serious challenges to one’s own self resources

Ageing Well

No one way to do it!
I don’t think I ever *feel* old…
I’ve been old for such a long time that it’s hard to know how to define that feeling.

Dame Roma Mitchell at 85 (1999)