The Social Construction of Old Age in the Modern West: A Literature Review

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Conventional wisdom tells us that history shapes all social phenomena, from class structures to gender roles to common expressions like "Bless you." Why, then, does human aging so often feel like a static process? Why does old age seem the same now as it ever was? How do we conceive of and talk about old age today? Like all social processes, the very essence of aging is socially constructed. Our notion of what it means to grow old is constantly shifting, different now in this moment of "rapid graying" than in centuries past, and no doubt different than it will be in the future. Our understanding of old age is produced and reproduced by political climates, religious movements, medical advances, and especially now, the ever-present media discourse.

In this moment of striking demographic change and apocalyptic predictions about the future of elder care, we require the insights of social science more than ever to uncover how this social moment developed and its implications for the future of old age. This paper explores the ways in which Western notions[1] of aging have evolved over the past few centuries, as well as the present-day intensification of the scholarly and popular discourse on "successful aging." It concludes with a discussion of potential mechanisms for molding a new discourse that both embraces old age and helps older adults cope with its many challenges.

The History of Aging in the Industrialized West

To understand the present and future of Western aging, we must first make sense of the concept's evolution in the context of other historical developments. Sociologist C. Wright Mills writes that "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both...the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period" (1959:3, 5). We live in a moment of profound demographic change: the world's population, particularly in the West, is "graying" as a result of declining fertility rates and medical advances that now enable most people to reach true old age (Thane 2005:9). By 2030, nearly one in five U.S. residents will be over the age of 65 (US Census Bureau 2010), and by 2050, there will be two billion people over the age of 60 worldwide (World Health Org. 2012).

These changes have spurred a surge in "apocalyptic demography," or the "prevailing belief...that an increasing dependent aging population means increasing demands on the resources of society," and that those demands will be impossible to meet (Robertson 1990:492). Yet history tells us that this is not necessarily a moment of crisis. Western society has supported "large numbers of old people" in the past, even when as few as one third of those over 60 had surviving children to care for them (Thane 2005:9-10). Historical studies of aging show that old age is not growing more unpleasant overall, but rather the challenges of aging are different. Prior to the establishment of Social Security and Medicare, "to be old was almost a guarantee of poverty" (Newman 2003:240). In fact, the percentage of impoverished older adults is lower today than in centuries past (Newman

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[1]This research focuses specifically on the social construction of aging in industrialized Western societies. It does not attempt to generalize about how the process unfolds in every part of the world.

2003:240). Aging in the modern world is hardly without challenges, but some of the challenges themselves are changing, while others remain similar to the troubles of the past.

The eighteenth century bore witness to a number of dramatic demographic shifts with respect to aging, the ancestors of the transformations occurring today. Beginning in the 1700s, life expectancies rose steadily with each passing century, making the aged more visible in society (Thane 2005:175). Prior to the eighteenth century, it was quite rare to reach one's eighties or nineties, and in fact, it was not until then that a notion of the elderly as a distinct and substantial population emerged (Troyansky 2016:60). This development is evident in the emergence of laws specifically directed toward the elderly during this century.

Western depictions of the elderly sentimentalized during this period, moving away from the caustic sentiment of the seventeenth century. The witch-hunts and atmosphere of "gerontophobia" that pervaded the West throughout the Middle Ages abated, as kindly grandparents emerged as stock characters in art and literature (Troyansky 2016:59). This transformation of attitudes occurred within the context of broader cultural transitions, namely secularization and the rise of revolutionary humanitarianism. "Rather than focus on the next world, a more secularized culture paid attention to the last years in this one" (Thane 2005:195). The aged body was no longer perceived as a mere "obstacle to salvation" (Thane 2005:195).

In the nineteenth century, alongside a heightened emphasis on individualism and privacy, households became increasingly limited to the nuclear family, and elders lived with their children less frequently, residing alone when possible or in institutions (Thane 2005:224). Increased occupational specialization made employment opportunities for the elderly scarce, and much like in the 20th and 21st Centuries, the development of new industrial technologies replaced older workers or made their skills obsolete (Thane 2005:212).

The sentimental, secular image of the eighteenth century elder persisted, but now, the utilitarian rhetoric of industrialization saw the human body primarily as an economic resource. It stressed that elders ought to remain autonomous as long as possible, for the sake of economic efficiency, but in Thomas Jefferson's words, ought also "to know when they shall get out of the way" and surrender their jobs to younger employees (Thane 2005:182, 214). In sharp contrast with the medicalization of aging in the twentieth century, the fatalistic nineteenth century attitude toward the elderly considered their physical suffering an inevitable part of "God's plan" (Thane 2005:250).

The medical advances associated with the twentieth century produced a new stage in the life course, never before experienced in human history—what is now called "The Third Age" (Thane 2005:264). In the industrialized West, it is now quite common to stay active and vital well into one's sixties and seventies. Improved pension systems in all Western capitalist countries have generated a class of elders that live autonomously for decades, often until the ends of their lives. Although more elders are now physically and financially capable of living alone, this does not imply they are "lonelier" than in times past. The proliferation of communication technology and automobiles has facilitated communication with loved ones (Thane 2005:284).

Still, these changes come with their own unique dilemmas. The prevalence of Alzheimer's disease has skyrocketed; with the help of Western medicine, the human body now often outlives the human mind (Thane 2005:284). Older adults, even those in their fifties and sixties, have found the professional skills they worked decades to build growing obsolete. In many fields, technological innovations have developed machines that replaced the positions humans once held in the workforce. The greater availability of cosmetic products made it easier and more normative to disguise the physical effects of aging, thus intensifying the sense of shame associated with "looking old" (Thane 2005:287). In the coming century, there will be greater numbers of older adults than ever before, and these technological changes will exert both negative and positive consequences for the lived experience of old age.

The popular discourse around aging also grew more complex during the twentieth century, shifting away from the traditional binary of narratives about the elderly—the sentimentalized,

unfailingly wise, Jesus-like elder versus the crabby, lonely misanthrope. With portraits like those of *Driving Miss Daisy* and *On Golden Pond*, the now-thriving film industry produced more nuanced images of the elderly (Thane 2005:295). Mirroring other contemporary social justice movements, serious discourse emerged about which terms for the elderly were pejorative or appropriate (Thane 2005:268). Though often still oversimplified, twentieth century popular culture and media appeared less eager to romanticize or vilify the elderly than in previous centuries.

Clearly, the shape of the life course and the characteristics associated with old age are evidently anything but static. Age categories (for example, the emerging "Third Age") are period-specific and culturally constructed. This is true not only of our final years; for instance, industrial societies tend to believe adolescence lasts much longer than small-scale societies do (Arnett 2000:469). Psychologist Jeffrey Arnett finds that Western individuals conceive of "adults" as those who have obtained a particular set of qualities (responsibility, independence, etc.) rather than those who have passed particular concrete milestones (marriage, completion of education, etc.) (Arnett 2000). Similarly, historian Pat Thane suggests that elders conceive of themselves as old or not based not on their actual ages, but rather on whether they "feel old," which usually correlates with the state of their physical abilities (Thane 2005:7). Indeed, throughout human history, "oldness" has been popularly determined by fitness over numeric age (Thane 2005:17).

We might understand such differences and similarities in the aging process through the "time and place" principle of life course theory, which affirms that "the life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience" (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003:12). As sociologist Katherine Newman explains, "aging is an historical phenomenon. The slice of time each of us moves through contains its own possibilities and limitations" (Newman 2003:5). Life course theory acknowledges the interdependent nature and mutual influence of all human lives (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003). The elderly have always, but particularly now, experienced the aging process in vastly different ways, depending on factors like class, gender, geographical region, physical ability, and kinship resources. As we approach the massive "Boomer" generation's golden years, it is critical to turn our attention to the historical trajectory of aging in order to understand what the process might look like for this generational cohort in the near future.

The Modern Aging Discourse: On "Successful" Aging

The modern day discourse around aging is distinct from that of past centuries, as is the process itself. Recent studies indicate that a majority of Americans now believe that the elderly are not useful to their communities, and also suggest that "the elderly tend to adopt negative definitions of themselves" in accordance with the common societal discourse (Maddox 1995:41, 25). Prior to the "medicalization" of aging, elderliness and infirmity were more or less accepted as inevitable for the lucky few who lived long enough to experience them. But the dramatic increase in the number of people surviving into old age has given rise to a notion of "successful aging" in both scholarly and popular discourse around old age. Though elderliness has historically been stigmatized, there has never before been such a strong expectation that the elderly actively try to delay the aging process. This section examines both academic and popular channels of aging discourse, and how each understands the newly articulated goal of "successful aging" in the industrialized West.

Like in any other historical moment, we feel we are in a time of particular crisis. The Western world of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries has been characterized by great anxiety over its own rapid aging. Although the Western world's population is older now than ever before, the conventional wisdom that we will struggle to support ever-growing numbers of elders is unfounded—or at the very least, we need not struggle as much as perhaps we will. Gerontologist Matilda White Riley argues that many older adults continue to be quite capable long after the workforce decides they have outlived their utility (1989). Workforce ageism contributes to this "structural lag" under which the capabilities of older adults are rejected and underutilized, and opportunities closed to

them (Riley 1989:15). In fact, despite the increase in the healthy aged population, the percentage over the age of 55 in the workforce has decreased over the last century (Riley 1989:17). Phyllis Moen writes that "recognizing the potentials of 'encore adulthood' could help manage the rising costs of social security, pensions, and health care" (Moen 2016:9). "Encore adulthood" is Moen's term for the emergent "Third Age": the time after the childrearing, intensely productive years of middle age, but before true old age, during which many kinds of productive work and activity are still possible. These include care of grandchildren, part- or even full-time work, volunteerism, and for some, hobbies requiring physical activity.

Riley advocates for "interventions" in our various institutions that might reclaim those years as fruitful (Riley 1989). In other words, she recommends structural changes that make explicit room for older adults as their numbers grow larger. These changes might include the redesign of physical spaces to suit them, as well as the creation of specific roles for them: for example, making spaces for them as part-time workers after retirement, or even as college students—as of 1989, over 1,000 colleges reserved places for senior citizens (Riley 1989:20). According to Riley, institutional encouragement of meaningful and feasible tasks for older adults has the potential to make aging more "successful."

But what constitutes successful aging after retirement? Over the course of five years, sociologist Meika Loe conducted in-depth interviews with 30 men and women over the age of 85—the category that the census calls the "oldest old"—about "how they're managing to build creative [and] meaningful lives" after their "productive" years have drawn to a close (Colgate University). Loe suggests that there is no "one model" for successful aging, but highlights specific, controllable factors that make aging easier. Among them are social connectedness, a sense of control over one's own life, and continuity of activities enjoyed in previous stages of life.

The social connectedness variable has strong representation in the literature on "successful aging." A wealth of research has demonstrated both emotional and health-related benefits associated with strong social networks. Social networks reduce stress, mitigate medical ailments, improve the immune system and heart health, and reduce depression and the experience of pain (Loe 2011:26). Loe argues that social capital is particularly important in old age, especially for those living and aging alone. She reports that "today, white men over the age of 65 are the highest-risk group for suicide" (2011:26). Sociologist Robert Atchley notes that retirement weakens social networks at a time of life when their strength is more important than ever (1991).

Loe identifies "family capital" as one critical component of overall social capital (2011:180-1). Family capital is a function of the resources—financial, socio-emotional, etc.—that any member of the unit can draw upon from the collective. Unfortunately, the individual's degree of family capital is usually out of her control. Loe claims that such capital can be critical to staying busy and socially connected in the last years of life. The ability to stay involved with one's family by caring for grandchildren or helping out with other household tasks gives a sense of purpose and usefulness, particularly for the multitude of women currently in old age who have made the care of others their life's work (Loe 2011:185). Loe's findings are thus consistent with Riley's assertion that an "older person's functioning is contingent on social conditions" (Riley 1989:18). This means that physical health is not the only salient factor in the new understanding of happy and "successful" aging. Indeed, the strongest predictor of well-being in old age is a sense of control and mastery, not physical health (George 2010).

Loe's discussion of "successful aging" also highlights the importance of a sense of control over one's own life. Fisher and Specht identify a sense of autonomy as one of the most salient aspects of older adults' definition of successful aging (1999). But in addition to the inherent satisfaction of supporting themselves, about 40% of the "oldest old" worry about being a burden to their children (Loe 2011:188). This worry is reflected and reproduced in the media. One recent content analysis of 253 British magazine advertisements found a tacit social pressure to stay active and fit in old age. This study revealed health problems and independence as central themes in ads tar-

geted toward older adults (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009). Other themes included peace of mind and comfort, advertising products or services designed to make aging feel as safe and easy as possible. Advertisers directed "fear" appeals in particular toward older women—for example, promoting products that provide help after a fall or in times of crisis (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009:46). These advertisements communicate to older adults the supposed necessity of taking affirmative steps to stay independent and healthy, in order to avoid being a burden on children or (implicitly) on society at large. Older adults are portrayed as fit and happy in magazine ads, in accordance with the image of aging advertisers attempt to sell (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009:39). This finding has been replicated in content analyses of American advertisements (Roy and Harwood 1997).

While these images portray the elderly as having agency and control over their health, they may also make false promises about aging and further stigmatize it, encouraging the delaying or denial of a natural and inevitable process. About 91% of older adults in American television ads fit the "Golden Ager" stereotype: healthy and vital (Lee, Carpenter and Meyers 2007:26). "The negative side" of these ads is the implication that the truly aged body (especially the aged female body) is undesirable and something to be actively postponed. The ads link self-worth to youthful standards of beauty and encourage competition between women as to who can "look younger" (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009:51, Cruikshank 2009). For example, creams for "mature skin" that claim to plump up and "improve skin density by 10 years" suggest a need to turn black the clock in order to feel valued (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009). The authors also argue that anti-aging advertisements portray health and fitness as not just ideal but virtuous, as it keeps one from becoming a burden on family and friends (Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh 2009:53). "Health in later life...[becomes] a symbol of moral virtue" (Rozanova 2006:126), and those unable to remain active or economically productive lose their social value. As a culture, we hold "deep and negative shared understandings [that] make the process of aging something to be dreaded and fought against, rather than embraced as a process that brings new opportunities and challenges" (FrameWorks Institute 2015:6). These are the gerontophobic prejudices the twenty-first century will find itself compelled to address.

The question remains: how does one age "successfully" when fitness and high activity are no longer possible? Within the last decade, social science research has begun to examine the effects of "meaningful task engagement" on the aging process. Psychologist Maureen C. McHugh finds that "creative activity and meaningful tasks are related to subjective well-being, and to better physical and psychological health for older people" (McHugh 2016:280). The kind of task itself, she argues, is far less important than the "flow state" it enables and the intrinsic motivation involved. McHugh draws on psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's definition of flow as the "state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it" (Csikszentmihalyi 2008:283). Flow can stem from a sense of meaningful contribution to others or to a community, a sense of accomplishment or competence, or any other dimension of purpose. It is related to the very act of making something, whether tangible or not (Bowling & Dieppe 2005; Fisher & Specht 1999).

At a time of life when sports and most professional occupations are taxing or even impossible, research suggests that the fine arts may be one of the most effective paths to flow for the "oldest old." As Loe finds, it may be that continuity of almost any activity eases the transition into old age. It is possible, however, that there is something intrinsically beneficial about artistic engagement. McHugh reports on a series of studies that found that the arts—dance, drama, poetry, journaling, and myriad others—have demonstrable benefits for the cognitive ability, health and well-being, creativity, self-esteem, social connectedness of older adults (McHugh 2016:285-6). This research suggests that one such practical "intervention" of the kind Riley advocates might be the creation of more arts programs designed specifically for the elderly. Future research must examine the influence of artistic engagement on older adults' experience of aging.

According to McHugh, there are two major contemporary narratives about aging and creative productivity. One school of thought sees old age as a time of creative decline, during which our capacity for "divergent thinking" declines (Maddox 1995:242). The other sees old age as a time of potential increase in creativity, particularly during the "Third Age" in which one often still has the capacity to be productive and free time in which to pursue interests (McHugh 2016:281). The most honest approach would perhaps be a combination of the two—old age does represent decline for some, but not uniformly. The underlying pattern is a vast and ever-increasing diversity of experiences of the aging process. For some, the process is easy and joyful; for others, it is characterized by pain, boredom, and loneliness.

Both the scholarly and media discourses on aging emphasize the importance of so-called "successful aging." Loe's emphasis on connectedness, control and continuity epitomize the scholarly attitude, stressing social factors that may help combat negative self-understanding amongst the aged. The academic emphasis on "successful" aging thus partially mirrors the media discourse on aging, similarly highlighting the agency of elders, but also devotes attention to the social structures that shape the modern life course.

Conclusions—The future of old age and the aging discourse

While all cultures have historically experienced human aging as a social phenomenon, each society's construction of the process is unique to its context—scientifically, politically, religiously, technologically. Today's social science must move beyond apocalyptic predictions of our inability to care for tomorrow's elders and instead focus on empirically supported, cost-effective measures that promote health and quality of life in old age. The unique challenges of the future of elder care require creative solutions in order to accommodate ever-larger numbers of elders, particularly those diagnosed with dementia. Researching and investing in arts programs for older adults appears an excellent starting point.

A second challenge the twenty-first century will face with respect to aging is the negative popular discourse around old age. The modern industrialized West strongly encourages "successful aging," which, while not as fatalistic as the discourse of centuries past, champions youthfulness and physical activity as the hallmarks of personal worth. If we aspire to foster a more accepting discourse, one that affirms the validity of the aged regardless of physical condition, we must promote meaningful tasks appropriate to the abilities of the aging individual. Without creative attention to the dilemmas before us, we risk increases in loneliness, depression and poverty amongst older adults. Whether enabling part-time work in the "Third Age" or promoting artistic engagement for dementia patients in their nineties, the main task at hand is to reopen the world of social connectedness and creative action to elders. We must reach them wherever they are in the aging process and bring them back into the folds of our communities, as valued members who know they have something unique and beautiful to contribute to our world.

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