Maintenance of Individual Identity in Older Adulthood: Responses to Successful Aging in America

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Abstract
With social, political, and economic conditions in the United States emphasizing individual productivity and self maintenance, there is a new concern for how American elders take care of themselves. In contemporary American culture, optimal models of the aging process—often labeled “Successful Aging” or “Healthy Aging”—emphasize independence, the importance of evading disease and disability, the maintenance of physical and mental facilities, and sustained engagement in social relationships. In this article I argue that my financially-comfortable, well-educated older American informants from Boston and West Palm beach communities respond to notions of Successful Aging by creating and constructing identities as “successful aging persons” that acknowledge a need to accept and adapt to change in later life. My informants creatively and resourcefully strove to create health, activity, and productivity in their own lives; in this way, they remained deeply invested in the American ideals of independence and autonomy. At the same time, many informants emphasized the need to not simply retain health, activity, and a youthful independence, but also to resourcefully adapt to the very real changes of age. In other words, the experiences offered by my informants tended to reflect ways they have appropriated culturally inflected notions of success into their own aging routines.
Successful Aging for them became about passing through later life’s stages with poise, intelligence, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency. Data collection began in the Spring of 2012 when I conducted preliminary interviews and gathered observation notes in a Jewish retirement community in Wellington, Florida; collection continued in Boston through the Spring of 2013. Individual phone interviews, home visits, group discussions, and participation in and observance of older-adult education classes all contributed to the collection of this research data.

Keywords: Aging, gerontology, identity, personhood, Successful Aging

Introduction
When asked, “In what ways do you think you’ve changed or stayed the same over the years,” an older adult informant from the Boston area responded by stating: “Well, hopefully one grows…. I’m really getting older--old--in fact. We all know we’re going to die sometime; this has new meaning now than in the past. There’s a kind of sadness in this recognition. Really, I didn’t choose to be born, and I’m not choosing to die. But I try to acquire some wisdom and understanding—how do I want to be as a person? .... Certainly one becomes more mature, hopefully.” Within recent decades, an emphasis on appropriate models for aging has emerged in the United States. With social, political, and economic conditions emphasizing individual productivity, there is new concern for not only how we, as a culture, will take care of the elderly population but also for how American elders will take care of themselves. American
society—in much gerontological scholarship and popular media discourses—has come to emphasize some essential factors of “success” in aging: evading disease and disability, maintaining of physical and mental facilities, and sustaining engagement in social relationships. Gerontological scholarship puts forward a model of Successful Aging, also referred to as Active Aging or Healthy Aging, which mirrors these themes emphasizing productivity, activity and self-sufficiency as characteristics of optimal aging.

John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn (1998) articulate these notions in a well-known study, which culminated in an appropriately titled book Successful Aging. Acknowledging the many factors that “conspire to put one octogenarian on cross-country skis and another in a wheelchair,” as they put it, these scholars aim to move beyond limitations of chronological age and genetic predisposition and clarify the factors by which individuals may retain and enhance their ability to function in later life (Rowe and Kahn 1998: xii). Their notion of Successful Aging involves “the ability to maintain three key behaviors or characteristics: low risk of disease and disease-related disability; high mental and physical function; and active engagement with life….Each factor is important in itself and to some extent independent of the others” (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 38).

With a prescription to successfully age, and sometimes without the abilities or the resources to fill the needs of such a prescription, one essentially has the potential to not succeed. I expected at the onset of this research project that most informants would reject the notion of Successful Aging altogether because of this possibility. However, I was surprised that most of the older adults with whom I spoke actually eagerly espoused the principles described in Successful Aging models and strove to create lives involving health, activity, and productivity. My informants drew upon the creative and resourceful uses of what one has at hand in later life and remained deeply invested in the American ideals of independence and autonomy in their older ages. Therefore, I argue that older Americans respond to notions of Successful Aging by creating and constructing identities as “successful aging persons.” In doing so, they acknowledge individual ability to draw upon American values of independence and autonomy, while also accepting and adapting to change in later life.

My informants spoke about the ways they have adapted culturally inflected notions of success into their own aging routines. Successful Aging for them became about passing through life’s stages with poise, intelligence, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency. This article first presents notions of success in aging scholarship and critiques of such success models. I then link these models of aging to culturally relevant concepts of identity. Finally, I use my data to discuss how notions of lifelong activity, independence, productivity, and individual agency allowed my informants to reformulate “successful aging” in a way that accommodates the changes they faced in their own lives. With my informants’ expanded definition, I suggest that a more fluid version of what entails success in aging emerges.

Methods

Most dialogue between scholars and critics of Successful Aging comes from academic fields such as psychology and gerontology. I use anthropological methods and theory to expose that which we take for granted as “normal” and discuss these ‘norms’ as particular

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1 I use capital letters throughout the paper when referring to this Successful Aging model, and lowercase letters to discuss how my informants discuss aging successfully.
cultural constructions or views of the world. An anthropological approach to aging in America also sheds light on gerontological material by offering an elder’s own voice to better understand how older persons in the United States define successful aging and what it means to age well; this kind of questions how an older person’s own definition can potentially both correspond to, and disrupt, public discourses on successful aging.

I conducted my research in two settings. First, I distributed seven surveys and held two open-ended in-depth interviews in an upper-middle class Jewish retirement community outside of West Palm Beach, Florida. I conducted this research while enrolled in an anthropology class at Brandeis University on Aging in Cross-Cultural Perspectives. The following year I collaborated with Dr. Sarah Lamb of Brandeis University to conduct twenty-two additional interviews with middle- and upper-middle class Bostonians in the New England suburbs, which provided most of the material used in this article. Sometimes we interviewed individuals and couples together, and at other time we collected data individually. Though we often recorded many of our interviews and later transcribed the recordings, there were times we simply took notes throughout the in-person interviews. All data collected thus far concentrates on a particular demographic—well-educated, middle-class and upper-middle class men and women who mostly identify as Jewish, although their religious, spiritual, and cultural forms of Jewishness vary. The ages of our interviewees ranged from sixty-two to eighty-five, while all informants identified as “aging” or “older” and saw themselves as appropriate subjects for this aging-focused study. By talking with and observing informants, as well as participating in lectures and adult learning classes offered at Brandeis’s Adult Education center (BOLLI) and other Boston-affiliated older adult initiatives, I collected enough material to juxtapose ideas about aging from gerontological and psychological scholarship with cultural and individual sentiments on older adult life. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, with identifying information eliminated out of respect for the privacy of our informants.

Scholarly Perspectives on Successful Aging

We view the aged as sick, demented, frail, weak, disabled, powerless, sexless, passive, alone, unhappy, and unable to learn—in short, a rapidly growing mass of irreversibly ill, irretrievably older Americans. To sum up, the elderly are depicted as a figurative ball and chain holding back an otherwise spry collective society. While this image is far from true, evidence that the bias persists is everywhere around us. Media attention to the elderly continues to be focused on their frailty, occasionally interspersed, in recent years, by equally unrealistic presentations of improbably youthful elders (Rowe and Kahn 1998: 12).

From the above quotation it is clear that Rowe and Kahn find fault with the ways we regard older adults in our culture. Rowe and Kahn assume American culture regards older adults with a negative impression of being slow, unproductive, and limited. While the ways older adults perceive themselves or continue to construct their own identities is arguably

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2 There were some informants who were not Jewish, and there were others who did not outwardly identify as a practicing Jew or even as a Jewish person at all. There was no specific reason why we interviewed mostly Jewish identifying elders, though more research would need to be conducted to see if the conclusions vary with more of a differentiation in demographics.
related to how American youth perceives American older adults, Rowe and Kahn argue that older Americans have more control over their independence than younger Americans assume. Though disability plays a role in the lives of many older adults, and may impact a full sense of control in the aging process, Rowe and Kahn argue that disability actually results from three key factors: 1) the impact of disease or often many diseases at once, 2) lifestyle factors, such as exercise and diet, which directly influence physical fitness and risk of disease and 3) biological changes that occur with advancing age—formally known as senescence (1998: 17).

Rowe and Kahn imply that the majority of older adults do not have to experience severe disability, for they have the ability to maintain their physical, social, and mental routines. This argument—that older adults can maintain control in later life—is certainly not limited to the scholarship provided by Rowe and Kahn. Successful Aging has become a dominant paradigm in both gerontology and popular discourse. For example, in “Be Fit For Life: A Guide To Successful Aging,” Dr. Steven R. Gambert (2010) writes that “while it is unlikely that a ‘magic potion’ capable of altering the aging process will ever be found, each of us has within our own power the ability to live longer, healthier, more productive and happy lives….we can certainly control many aspects of our own lives” (2010: 1). Such an emerging vision of Successful Aging presents a highly positive and active vision of what it means to live as an older adult. However, the Successful Aging model can also be critiqued. Elders can often experience these regards to aging as prescriptive, and critics of Rowe and Kahn’s model for Successful Aging suggest that these models imply an undesirable alternative of aging: to age unsuccessful or unproductively (Gullette 1997). With this notion, older adults can easily expect—and quite often assume—failure in weakness or death as possible and inevitable parts of their aging processes. Therefore, Rowe and Kahn’s Successful Aging model could be reformulated so that success is not only based on maintaining health, an active social life, and a sense of independence and vitality, all of which are values so rooted in American culture.

Other critics address how Successful Aging pays insufficient attention to how each older adult experiences natural changes in later life differently and may reformulate their notions of success accordingly (Martinson 2011). With these standards and criteria for aging in America, the aging model as proposed by Rowe and Kahn has the potential to become a binary pitting success against failure. These models therefore, perhaps unintentionally, exclude those older adults with limitations from relating to the aging community for which these models are created in the first place. What these models neglect is older adults’ culturally-sanctioned ability to redefine and reformulate very individualized aging processes. My argument, then, explores the ways older adults may in fact appropriate culturally enriched notions of success into their aging practices. I suggest that our culture may not always accept the changes that occur in later life, and, as a result, our older adult communities may not feel more inclined to accept them as well. Without this acceptance, our older adults cannot redefine their roles in society for themselves, especially in ways they would deem successful or meaningful. I will explore the concept of identity-making in the next section to discuss the ways my informants, without much knowledge of the literature dedicated to Successful Aging, do in fact fit models of success into their own aging routines and construct new identities as successful older adults.
Relating Selfhood, Identity, and Aging

Theoretical models of personhood support the constructability of identity-making in older adult culture, and allow for an individualized notion of success in the aging practices. Cultural attitudes profoundly inflect the aging process, the way they do theories of personhood; thus aging well and identity formation in America are influenced by the cultural values of independence and autonomy. Social psychologists Hazel Markus and Shinabu Kitayama (1991) argue that the “western self” is independent, self-contained, and autonomous. They also claim that this model of the Western self is how people relate to the values ingrained within the structures of Western culture: “We suggest that for many cultures of the world, the Western notion of the self as an entity containing significant dispositional attributes, and as detached from the context, is simply not an adequate description of selfhood. Rather, in many construals, the self is viewed as interdependent with the surrounding context, and it is the ‘other’ or the ‘self-in-relation-to-other’ that is focal in individual experience” (Markus and Kitayama: 1991: 225). This particular view of selfhood indeed influences aging ideologies and practices in the United States. Markus and Kitayama understand the imagined “Western Self” to be supposedly autonomous and independent. As indicated by my ethnographic research, older adults are just as concerned with maintaining their independent selves in their later life as they are in their youth. Using this idea, it becomes clear how “independence” and “autonomy,” at any age, are American values. My informants adapt their identity as they attribute success to their aging practices in relation to those values.

Though we imagine ourselves to be autonomous, and though we often act as autonomous beings, we are so influenced by independence as a cultural value that we continue to pursue it throughout old age. In other words, while Americans do believe in some type of autonomy, this autonomy is in itself instilled within us by our cultural milieu. Indeed, the ways people in the United States develop their identities are importantly reflected by larger cultural understandings, primarily in the value placed on self-governing. Given this emphasis on independence, it may not be surprising that most of my informants easily qualify their own aging as successful. Identity formation for older Americans relies on their individual utilization of socially constructed models of aging as well as their personal application of such models to their self-positioning within American culture.

Redefining Roles for Older Adults: American Perspectives on Successful Aging

There’s an expression. “Getting old is not for sissies.” That’s true! You have to work on it. As I get older, I get bolder. I’m taking more risks.... I’m eighty-four plus. But in terms of growing older, I never think of myself as eighty-four plus! So maybe for me aging is different: that’s a positive. I feel very much alive, very interested and excited.... A downside is a loss of—not identity—but a loss of a functional role to play. I’m no longer a cook, I’m not really a mother now, I’m not a wife. You know, I don’t have to do anything. I often cook a little if I want to, but I don’t have to do so, as I can eat my meals here. There is no real responsibility that I have.

These words demonstrate how my informants interpreted notions of Successful Aging to encompass American ideals of independence and productivity in their later life changes.
Eliana, 84, is an articulate and dynamic woman with short silver hair and a warm smile who lives in an independent apartment in a retirement community in the Boston suburbs. In this quotation, we see how she regretted a “loss of a functional role to play,” when describing her own aging. By underlining a noteworthy absence of purpose, Eliana expressed her own very American investment in productivity and self-determination throughout older adulthood.

Separately, she also conveyed her awareness of the cultural importance placed on maintaining successful aging through an investment in productivity—being active—in our culture. With an inability to identify as “productively” as she once did, she regretted her loss of purposefulness. Her words, then, provided an example for a way many older adults may define the terms for successful aging actively, thereby recognizing its pertinence in society and applying its significance to their routines.

Eliana herself testified to the seeming contradiction that emerged in my research and that forms the crux of my thesis: that older Americans are deeply invested in successfully aging, so much so that they may use culturally sanctioned values to creatively “succeed” even when the literature itself as well as youth-centered American culture would seem to marginalize them as failures. I initially critique the literature concerning Successful Aging for providing too much of a prescription to older adult Americans. However, Eliana actually seemed invested in the notions of Successful Aging proposed by Rowe and Kahn because of her grounding in American values, which promote a continuous sense of personhood dependent on productivity. Yet, at the same time, she used the very traits that Successful Aging—and American culture, for that matter—encourages to avoid “failing” at these aging prescriptions. Therefore, she almost paradoxically displayed a culturally sanctioned sovereignty, “scrappiness,” by crafting her own guidelines for success in aging, and by translating what would be considered a prescriptive failure in the literature into success.

I often began in-person interviews by asking my informants to describe Successful Aging as they understand it. Strikingly, most of them offered themselves as examples of successful aging by saying things like “I think it’s what I am doing” and “I work very hard to live that way.” They felt as though the productivity they once maintained easily was something they wanted to continue throughout older adulthood. Additionally, identities involving independence and autonomy through social engagement continued to remain important. Eliana also addresses the ways she considers herself successful at aging:

Personally, I feel like I’m successful [at aging]. I’ve kept learning; I haven’t become crotchety; I’ve done things to keep my health up; I’ve reached out, instead of wallowing in sadness [and] when I do feel sad, I get to the phone and call someone. I don’t know—what else is there? I think I’m creative. I often host Shabbat dinner here for my family, and one time I said, this will be a green Shabbat, everyone bring something green. So, they all did; they dressed in green clothing and we ate green foods. They see me as fun—it makes life more interesting to be fun! Being open to doing things and having fun: I don’t know, I guess that’s successful aging.

Without being directly familiar with Successful Aging literature, Eliana’s words suggested the importance of mental awareness, individual creativity and an active social life. Her emphasis on
an ability to change, perhaps refusing the constraints age can impose, was clear when she said "being open to doing things and having fun: I don’t know, I guess that’s successful aging.” This sentiment seems vital for her constructing an identity as an older person. Change, for Eliana, became not something that is imposed from the “outside” but rather sought and valued. With the words “I feel like I’m successfully aging….I think I am creative,” Eliana expressed resourcefulness and a refusal to succumb to sadness over life changes. Success, in Eliana’s way of thinking, became about what one can do with the present; she acted as an individual that can change, risk and evolve—and therefore succeed—in self-care.

What seemed to be added to Rowe and Kahn’s definition of successful aging, as permitted by the American values undergirding this Successful Aging literature, is the ability for older adults to rework definitions of success through an independent and creative initiative. Taking the ideas offered above regarding identity and applying it to my informants, we once again understand that by acknowledging the existence of individual agency in the aging process, older Americans reformat their own identities so that they feel they have successfully aged. Another informant, Mellie, 74, a retired social worker, spoke to this at greater length. She discussed the maintenance of physical health, a strong social life, and an active sense of spirituality as central to her conception of how she is successful at aging: “I haven’t read much about [Successful Aging]. But I have been working very hard to live that way—involved and interested in learning new things. I’m computer literate. I like to do new things. I really enjoy photography a lot. I like to expand myself a little bit…. I don’t want to miss out. I don’t like missing out on anything.”

For Mellie, physical and emotional adaptation in later life was important to be able to successfully age. She suggested that one must have the ability and desire to learn new things and, without it, older adults can consider themselves failing at aging. Once again, we see an older adult who actively sought out change as a way to creatively appropriate the aging process to forming her identity. She worked through several different jobs for almost her entire life, and retired not once but two separate times. Needless to say, she valued being seen as a helpful contributor to the world around her. With the words, “I don’t want to miss out,” Mellie confirmed that she now needs to work through various outlets in order to maintain her productivity. No longer did she have any extremely time-consuming responsibilities as worker and mother, and so she needed to construct her new identity as a retiree still interested in learning and connecting to life in the present time (Lynch 2009). She had this desire to take risks and, with this desire, she creatively recast the ability to accept the inevitable changes. She stated:

Having been a social worker for 30 years…it just became part of my DNA to try to make a difference. And I needed something in that. I felt very self-indulgent when I first retired because I was taking classes and I was doing things I wanted to do—travelling, you know—whatever I wanted to do, which I had never done. So something was missing. So I looked for something and I am involved in a volunteer project which I am satisfied with. Also my synagogue has a very active social action group and I do things with them. I’ve done habitat for humanity, Saturday we went to Rosie’s place and cooked lunch…. That really rings my chimes. Things like that.
When she said “it just became part of my DNA to try to make a difference,” we can understand how difficult it was for Mellie to consider a life now drastically different than the one she maintained as a social worker for thirty years. The ability to accept change and even to search it out is an intense form of productivity; after all, this ability is a seeking out of that which is unknown. The thread of productivity and the active helping of those around her secured Mellie’s new identity and allowed her to maintain a sustained sense of selfhood. In older adulthood she needed to take what she had around her—volunteer work, technology, her grandchildren—and integrate them into her day to day routine as an aging adult. In doing so, she admitted to living a very successful life as an aging adult in American culture.

The statements of many other informants reveal a similar sentiment: that actively reconstructing new roles creates happiness in later life as well as a sustained sense of self and identity. These older adults hold similar notions to the ones outlined by Rowe and Kahn and live their lives trying to reformulate health, vibrancy, and engagement into their new identities as older adults. Once again, we see a connection between cultural values of control in independence and the ways my informants apply notions of success to their daily aging routines. Sometimes my informants had to very creatively apply values of productivity and autonomy in order to present an identity as a successful ager.

Judith is one such informant, who exemplifies how sometimes it is essential to reformulate something that would prescriptively be a failure into something positive through recourse to American ideals of independence and autonomy. My advisor and I met Judith, a retired professor in her 70s, at her home for an in-person interview, as she wanted us to see her home as “part of her story.” She greeted us at the door with a welcoming smile and immediately brought us through her comfortable kitchen and into the rather large dining room, where we talked for over an hour over a cup of tea.

Judith spoke a bit differently from other informants. Her background included no spouse or children and instead involved a contentious retirement from a job she loved as well as a battle with cancer, from which she was supposed to die. While most of my informants attributed success in their aging practices to the success they once held in their careers and the family with whom they spend their retirements, Judith instead attested her successful aging to her ability to construct success for herself in the years following her trouble:

It was an early retirement, I was very young, and I was sick. And I don’t know really any more if I was sick before I lost the enthusiasm for teaching and they squeezed me out. But it turned out to be an absolute blessing.... I felt like a non-being. And to work that through is one of the privileges of life. I’m not kidding. That is like the most important—to realize you’re not a thing, you’re a you—is huge. And not easy.... So I feel very lucky. I feel very lucky that I feel so rich on the inside, I mean I don’t have enough time in the day.... I’ve done everything, Ti Chi and Yoga.... from each of these, I’ve learned how to make my aging better. Simply very easy things like balance. You have to think about it. That takes brain cells. And that astounds me and makes me angry sometimes. I want to be able to have my old self back who can multi-task and run around.....[But] It gives you an example of how I keep looking.
Older adults like Judith may accept such difficult changes and adjust accordingly, if the permission to adapt individually is sanctioned by the very values that build successful aging models. Judith emphasized not only simply maintaining activity as important to aging well, but also the necessity of accepting and adapting to changes in all levels of activity. In this situation, she might have been able to take Rowe and Kahn’s formula and easily apply its guidelines, which reflect American values, to her own terms. However, Rowe and Kahn could consider her unsuccessful in her aging process because she lived without a family, with an early retirement that ended her productivity in the workplace, and a forced active life with an attempt to revive her health. Nevertheless, she appropriated the ideals of independence and productivity to meet her own standards, exercising in a social capacity and offering her time to specific groups of people that gave her life meaning. Judith, who would seem to be a failure, creatively redefined herself by applying her own meanings to “success” through claims of individuality and independence. It is therefore evident that that older adults can identify with American culture as they so choose throughout their later life stages, and continue to formulate their identities accordingly. The American value of independence, and even the creative use of limited resources and capabilities, makes such a reformulating possible and ever the more necessary.

**Generalizing Successful Aging: A Conclusion**

Notions of Successful Aging in the United States do not have to be prescribed narrowly to older adults. People attain satisfaction in their lives in relation to identity construction processes. American culture emphasizes not only independence, but also some autonomy in defining one’s productive roles and responsibilities. Therefore, remaining independent and yet engaged with family and friends is considered a successful way to construct an identity as an older adult American. My informants, who seem to agree with this claim, offer many different ways to appropriate the American regard for success in aging into their individual lives. Additionally, since American culture grounds Successful Aging practices on American values, a creative Successful Aging built upon independence and autonomy offers a culturally sanctioned interpretation of an otherwise seemingly prescriptive model of aging well.

This paper thus looks at the permutations of Successful Aging in practice through the lens of my informants. These informants reveal that older Americans may use Successful Aging models to maintain a culturally dominant notion of independence in their identity construction, simply because they have their own ideas of how to approach the natural progression of change and adaption in later life. In other words, these informants harnessed the ideology of independence-based success that undergirds prescriptive Successful Aging models, and in doing so they sought to find success in their own, individualized aging processes. Thus, while the scholarship provides a prescription with certain needs to be met in order to succeed at aging, Successful Aging can actually depend instead on how older adults interpret optimal aging and how they choose to apply their interpretations to their later lives. In being able to adjust to the aging process on their own accords—to remain independent, healthy, and active by acknowledging certain changes and limitations—they are able to adapt to accommodate successful aging into their daily routines in culturally understandable, often admirable, ways.

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