Successful Aging or Meaningful Decline: Comparative Approaches to the End of Life

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Healthy Aging – The Secrets of Successful Aging
Linguistic Ability in Early Life and Cognitive Function and Alzheimer's Disease in Late Life
Findings From the Nun Study

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Objective—To determine if linguistic ability in early life is associated with cognitive function and Alzheimer's disease in late life.

Design—Two measures of linguistic ability in early life, idea density and grammatical complexity, were derived from autobiographies written at a mean age of 22 years. Approximately 58 years later, the women who wrote these autobiographies participated in an assessment of cognitive function, and those who subsequently died were evaluated neuropathologically.

Setting—Convents in the United States participating in the Nun Study; primarily convents in 19

Participants—725 to 958 women

Results—Low idea density in early life was associated with lower cognitive function in late life. Low idea density in early life was associated with a 41% increased risk of Alzheimer's disease.

Conclusion—Linguistic ability may be assessed by analyzing ideas and syntax in writing, providing a new method for the early detection of Alzheimer's disease.

Key Words: Neuropathology, Alzheimer's disease

Aging and Alzheimer's Disease: Lessons From the Nun Study

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Lord, hear our prayer: Prayer, Social Support, and Well-Being in a Catholic Convent

390 ETHOS

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Research Article

Overcoming Elderspeak: A Qualitative Study of Three Alternatives

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Abstract

Purpose: Elderspeak is a form of communication that uses simple language and speaking slowly, and it is often used with older individuals. The purpose of this study was to explore the effectiveness of three different strategies for reducing elderspeak in a Catholic convent.

Methods: The study involved 96 nuns in a Catholic convent in the Midwest. The nuns were divided into three groups: (1) the intervention was elderspeak only; (2) the intervention was elderspeak and slow speech; and (3) the intervention was elderspeak and slow speech with additional social support.

Results: The results showed that the intervention group used significantly fewer elderspeaks than the control group. The intervention group also reported increased social support and a decrease in loneliness.

Conclusions: Elderspeak is not only ineffective in improving communication with older individuals but also increases feelings of isolation and loneliness. Providing additional social support can help reduce elderspeak and improve communication.
Successful Aging defined as:

“avoidance of disease and disability, maintenance of high physical and cognitive function, and sustained engagement in social and productive activities”

- Rowe and Kahn 1997, 439

“Our concept of success connotes more than a happy outcome; it implies achievement rather than mere good luck….To succeed in something requires more than falling into it; it means having desired it, planned it, worked for it.

- Rowe and Kahn 1998, 37
All these factors are critical to our view of aging, which... we regard as largely under the control of the individual. In short, successful aging is dependent on individual choices and behaviors. It can be attained through individual choice and effort.”

- Rowe and Kahn 1998, 37
The successful aging paradigm produces:

“A vision of the ideal person as not really aging at all in late life, but rather maintaining the self of one’s earlier years”

(Sarah Lamb 2014)

Non-neutral Themes
In the Successful Aging Paradigm

1. Individual Agency and Control
2. Independence
3. Maintenance of Productive Activity
4. Permanent Personhood or Ageless Adulthood

(Sarah Lamb 2014)
In West Bengal India, older people frequently talk of readiness for death.

In many communities, preparing for decline and death is a normal, natural, appropriate unfolding of the life-course.
Two Problems with An Uncritical Model of Successful Aging:

1. **It is inaccurate**: The very communities upheld as exemplars of successful aging don’t adhere to the cultural values presented in the model.

2. It produces negative experiences for older adults as it continues to **stigmatize aging and construct decline as failure**.

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Who ages successfully?
Non-neutral Themes
In the Successful Aging Paradigm

1. Individual Agency and Control
2. Independence
3. Maintenance of Productive Activity
4. Permanent Personhood or Ageless Adulthood

(Sarah Lamb 2014)
Independence
Interdependence

Productivity
“Being Good” Not “Doing Good”
Ageless Adulthood
All Stages of Life Are Valued

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The Nuns’ Model of Aging

1. Locates control and agency outside themselves

2. Sense of interdependence

3. Values “being good,” not productivity

4. Values all stages of life including decline
An Alternative Model: Meaningful Decline

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Works Cited


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