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Futures 35 (2003) 575–588

FUTURES

www.elsevier.com/locate/futures

Psychology, meaning and the challenges of longevity

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Abstract

Humankind has begun to reap one of the most valued harvests of its scientific and technological pursuits: a significant increase in human longevity. We now live longer than ever before, due in large part to advances in medicine and health care that provide those who have the opportunity to afford them a lifespan that for many approaches or exceeds the 100-year mark. It is now within the realm of possibility that people will live lives of 125 years or more within the next century. However, our ability to increase physical longevity may have outstripped our ability to deal individually and socially with these new lives, these new existences that go well beyond what has traditionally been considered a “working life”. How well-prepared are we psychologically to cope with the meaning of a life that extends to as much as 150 years or more? In this new “age of longevity”, what are the challenges for psychology as a resource for humanity in its quest to give definition to the experience of being alive, as well as for managing the affairs of everyday life? Traditional developmental theories in psychology tend to articulate early stages of life in detail, but are generally mute on the matter of later life. Cognitive psychology has been inclined to view longevity as leading to a deterioration of mental faculties due to “aging”. This paper examines the psychological implications of increased lifespans from an optimistic perspective by reviewing current developments in research on cognition, emotion and aging. The review identifies trends in psychology that, if emphasized and strengthened, may lead to improved theoretical frameworks that cast longevity in a positive light, and that identify how people can find meaning and fulfillment throughout their whole lifespan.

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“Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life for which the first was made.” *Robert Browning* “Rabbi Ben Ezra”

I first encountered Browning’s works as an undergraduate, and being a pre-engineering student at the time my tendencies toward poetry were stunted to say the best. Few of the great works of literature my teachers compelled me to read at that stage of my life and development made enough of an impact to last beyond the length of the course requiring their reading. Much has changed since then and my interests in literature and what literature has to say that is of value for our lives has deepened. But Browning’s enthusiastic call to join him in aging has always been a fascination. Indeed, what could be more of a contradiction to modern attitudes about becoming elderly than to claim “the best is yet to be”? What can be more of a challenge to how we approach the relationship between being young and being old than to claim that the last of life is “for which the first was meant”? What can the possible rewards of the golden years be that transcend the glorious enthusiasms, unfettered optimisms, and just pure physical conveniences of being young? Or, was Browning simply trying to sucker us all into a *fait accompli*, the hopeful outcome of which is the envy of the very youth that the aged often envy so much?

There is little enough envy of the aged today. I approach these years with great caution, recognizing that how I look upon those who are two decades older than myself will, in turn, condition me to see myself in those years much in the way that I see them now. “Aging” is not something anyone really wants to do. We want to, at best, “grow older”, a perspective that carries with it a more positive spin: growing wiser, growing up, or simply “growing” with all of its new-age connotations of personal enlightenment and becoming. I am not “aging”, I am “becoming at one”.

The language we have adopted to talk about the time-course of life, and particularly about the years in the latter third of that course, does much to frame both how we live those years and how we anticipate them in our youth. Our expectations are ones of decline, physical debilitation and mental infirmity. We “retire”, as in withdrawal into seclusion, away from the mainstream of life and into the backwater eddy of inaction. On the shelf.

Much of this view has been reinforced by how humanity has approached examining this aspect of its own time course through science. We study aging with an eye to how its effects influence the abilities of those so afflicted to perform or operate compared to those who still have a grasp on their full faculties. And, of course, we find that as people grow older, they do not approach life in the same way as do younger people.

Part of our view on life comes from the very way in which science is funded: those interested in the last of life often receive their support from the National Institute on Aging, not the National Institute on The Last of Life for Which the First Was Made. Research agendas often focus on identifying sources of infirmity and potential prostheses, either physical or social, that can ease the lives of the elderly on their way toward achieving the goal of successful aging. All too often, success in aging means imposing relatively few demands on social resources or on the lives of younger

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