Introduction: Perspectives on Healthy Aging

Norah Keating
University of Alberta

The lenses with which we view aging are formed by many things: the maturing of gerontology as a discipline, the development of our theoretical and methodological tools for examining age and aging, and population aging itself. “Healthy aging” has become one of those lenses. For many years our attention has been drawn to the frailties associated with aging as we attempt to alleviate the suffering associated with age-related illness and disability. The late-twentieth-century addition of health-oriented models of aging has added a new dimension to the focus and language of our enquiries. Healthy aging, aging well, and successful aging now are part of the lexicon of gerontology.

Contemporary interest in positive aspects of aging is probably not a coincidence. A cohort of baby boomer researchers, approaching the end of their careers, has added new perspectives to the theoretical interests that have been part of their academic lives. Canadians have had strong voices in the pursuit of understanding positive aspects of aging. The provocative Overselling of Population Aging: Apocalyptic Demography, Intergenerational Challenges and Social Policy, edited by Ellen Gee and Gloria Gutman, was a watershed Canadian publication, exemplifying this approach. There are strong messages here, rejecting the notion of population aging as catastrophic.

In this issue we offer excellent examples of contemporary Canadian theoretical and research work on healthy aging. The genesis of the idea to present such a set of papers came from a symposium at the CAG annual conference in 2002, invited and funded by CIHR. In our Research on Aging Policies and Practice (RAPP) research group we had been exploring the conceptual underpinnings and theoretical roots of healthy aging. Thus I welcomed the invitation from Réjean Hébert to develop the symposium. Its title, “Healthy Aging: From Genes to Society,” reflects the diverse disciplinary interests in this topic.

From its inception, the CIHR Institute of Aging has had a mandate to support research to promote healthy aging. The focus on positive aspects of aging is exemplified in the Institute of Aging’s goals and objectives: “The increase in the proportion of older Canadians creates an extraordinary opportunity to empower people to arrive at older ages in better health and closer to a state of fully realized well-being, to seek the full inclusion and participation of older people in society, to enable older people to contribute more effectively to their communities and to the development of society. Research is needed on the determinants of healthy and successful aging…” (http://www.cihr-irsc.gc.ca/e/10332.html).

The titles of the papers in this issue reflect the healthy aging lens: theorizing about aging well, quality of life of older adults, contextual effects on life satisfaction, seniors and activity. Each takes a somewhat different approach to understanding healthy aging. Each uses different language to describe the construct. Yet they share beliefs about healthy aging: context and perspective are important, and healthy aging is a process rather than a state.

In the lead article, Chapman traces the evolution of the concept of healthy aging. She reminds us that researchers have been exploring ideas of healthy aging for more than 50 years and presents a convincing argument that our explorations have led to a number of prescriptions for healthy aging. The prescriptions for an integrated self that include the right mix of resources and engagement have come in and out of fashion, changing over the decades. Chapman sees an emerging approach to healthy aging that does not contend with how people should age but with how individuals make sense of life. From this perspective, healthy aging is an ongoing process of meaning-making undertaken by older adults in response to later life events and transitions.

Richart, Laforest, Dufresne, and Sapinski question what constitutes quality of life of older adults. Their language is not that of healthy aging, yet early in their paper, they state that increasing quality of life of older adults will be central in making the transition to an aged society, thus focusing on positive aspects of aging. Further, they argue that conceptualization in quality of life research has been predefined by experts interested in measurement instruments. They call for, and illustrate, approaches that include the voices and perspectives of older adults. Important domains of quality of life emerge from their analyses: health and independence, financial security, social integration, health care, housing and community services, and a sense of control over life decisions.
Bourque, Pushkar, Bonneville, and Béland consider paradoxes of aging. They explore two: the frequently reported finding of a stable sense of well-being in elderly people, despite their cumulative losses and age-related negative changes, and the finding that despite poorer objective circumstances, women do not report lower life satisfaction than men. In their paper, they consider the influence of contextual factors on life satisfaction. They find that men’s independence and women’s social embeddedness are key elements of their satisfaction with life domains. Healthy aging is evident in their exploration of the elements of life satisfaction. Their gendered analysis is an important reminder of the different life-course experiences of women and men.

In the final paper in the series, Victorino and Gauthier present findings from their analyses of time use of older Canadians over the past 20 years. They contribute to the healthy-aging debate by providing empirical evidence for an overall shift toward “active aging” since the 1980s. Their reasoned approach to examining the nuances of involvement in different domains of activity, and by women and men, is a nice contrast to the current rhetoric about seniors as passive watchers of television and putterers. Victorino and Gauthier see a “good news” story in their findings and conclude that seniors’ increased engagement provides positive outcomes in health benefits, assistance to others, and contributions to the Canadian economy.

Together these papers show themes in current thinking about healthy aging. One theme is that context is important in understanding positive aspects of aging. For example, Victorino and Gauthier look to societal trends such as downsizing of companies and incentives to early retirement for their explanations of trends in labour force involvement and later life activity. Richart et al. explicitly state their belief that quality of life must be understood as contextual, and they focus their study on understanding those contexts. A second theme is that healthy aging is best understood from the perspective of older adults. In their call for the privileging of participants’ voices, Richart et al. reject the idea of expert perspectives on criteria of healthy aging. Chapman notes the shift from a prescriptive approach of an ideal, healthy, integrated self to one in which the focus is on meaning-making by older adults themselves. Finally, several authors view healthy aging as a process rather than a state. Chapman talks about ongoing meaning-making, while Bourke et al. explore stability in life satisfaction in the face of changing life circumstances.

In sum, the papers advance our thinking about the complexities of healthy aging, the assumptions that underlie this approach, and the methods we use to understand positive aspects of aging. The juxtaposition of these ideas does not happen without time, effort, and resources. I would like to thank Réjean Hébert and the Institute of Aging for supporting the CAG symposium and asking someone whose main interest is theoretical to organize it. As editor of this journal, Carolyn Rosenthal put in many hours in reviewing, cajoling, organizing, and choosing manuscripts. It has been a pleasure to work with her. To the authors themselves, my thanks for your fine work and patience in waiting until a set of manuscripts was ready for this issue. I hope that this offering will provide the impetus for more debate and reflection about the many faces of aging.

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