Successful ageing as a persistent priority in ageing research

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What's going on these days in the international ageing research and how do the European Journal of Ageing's (EJA) contents correspond with this? We thought that it would be worthwhile to reflect a bit on this question in our volume 13 editorial by focussing specifically on the issue of successful ageing, while looking back at EJA's volume 12 and this first issue of volume 13.

Successful ageing is an enduring and overarching theme on stage in gerontology since the early work of Havighurst (1961) published in the first issue of *The Gerontologist* (see also Baltes and Baltes 1990; Ryff 1989). Rowe and Kahn's concept of successful ageing, introduced in Rowe and Kahn (1987) and among the rare gerontology works that made it to *Science*, continues to be the most prominent approach in the more recent gerontology. Their concept (see also Rowe and Kahn 1997) is based on three components, i.e., (1) low probability of disease and related disability; (2) high cognitive and physical functioning; and (3) active engagement with life. In contrast to "normal ageing", successful ageing addresses what would be possible if latent reserve capacities and healthy lifestyles unfold to the maximum possible. Proof that this concept is still alive and kicking is that in 2014 *The Gerontologist* published a full special section on successful ageing, and in 2017 the *Journals of Gerontology: Social and Behavioral Sciences* will also devote a special section to *Successful Aging 2.0: Conceptual Expansions for the 21st Century*,

including a Rowe and Kahn-authored editorial (Rowe and Kahn 2015).

In the 2015 volume and in the present issue of our Journal, the term 'successful ageing' appeared only once explicitly in the title of an article: Feng et al. in their paper entitled "Prevalence and correlates of successful ageing: a comparative study between China and South Korea" indeed closely refer to Rowe and Kahn's (1997) model of successful ageing and found according to their criteria that only 18.6 % of older adults in China compared to 25.2 % in South Korea were successful agers. However, EJA published a number of papers addressing themes related to successful ageing via such constructs as mental health, healthy ageing, health problems, health outcomes, social engagement, residential satisfaction, liveability, psychological well-being, quality of life, active ageing life, and avoidance of loneliness and depressive symptoms. Indeed, 16 out of the 41 articles (40 %) published last year or in the present issue speak on key components of successful ageing. From that point of view, successful ageing can be said to have been the most frequently treated topic in recent EJA contents.

So, let's ask: What is it that still attracts gerontologists' preoccupation with successful ageing? A quick answer to this question may be that the goal of ageing research continues to be the improvement of the lives of older adults by making better use of reserve capacities and through a range of strategies to prevent or delay disease and functional impairment. At the same time, it could be that the nature of ageing overall has changed in many aspects (e.g., cognitive functioning, functional impairment, well-being, loneliness) since Havighurst and others first reflected on successful ageing. Consequently, visions of what successful ageing meant at the beginning of the 1960s may have come to reality in our time, at least in many of the

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developed countries. Unfortunately, there are no data allowing analysis of long-term trends in well-being and health since the 1960s. Hence, we have to rely on more recent trends. In accord with the assumption that some indicators of successful ageing have improved over the years are, for instance, the rather strong positive cohort effects in cognitive performance, comparing 90+ year-olds born in 1915 to those born in 1905 in Denmark (e.g., Christensen et al. 2013). Going further, our editorial board member Denis Gerstorf and colleagues (Gerstorf et al. 2015) showed, based on cohort data of the Berlin Ageing Study, that more recent cohorts of old and very old adults compared to previous cohorts in Germany not only reveal improved cognitive function, but also higher well-being and positive affect and lower negative affect. This may all mean that successful ageing simply is a natural outcome of secular change and the increasing “cultivation” of ageing in our societies. If so, should we just wait for successful ageing to happen!?

This “wait and see” strategy may not be a good one, when we also consider other things to be learned about successful ageing. First, cultural differences in successful ageing dynamics continue to surface, and there is still no robust and culturally invariant measure of successful ageing. For example, a paper by Mudrak et al. (2016, this issue) shows that compared to previous findings which stem mostly from the North American context, health and self-efficacy in older Czech adults do not play as prominent a role in the association between physical activity and quality of life-related outcomes. Also, although Feng et al. (2015) overall found high similarity in the association patterns between successful ageing and a range of predictors considered, differences between China and South Korea emerged as well (e.g., rural residency negatively related with successful ageing in China, but not in South Korea). Furthermore, a paper based on South African data by van der Pas et al. (2015), which was featured in a prominent session on successful ageing at the *Gerontological Society of America's* Annual Scientific Meeting in November, 2015 shows that poor environmental conditions (e.g., no indoor water tap) are negatively connected with successful ageing (life satisfaction in this case) in that country. Such a connection likely did not exist in most of the Western Europe countries and in North America even in the early 1960s, when gerontology research communities started to reflect upon successful ageing.

Second, a “wait and see successful ageing attitude” is challenged by emerging data which suggest expansions in disability in cohorts to come (e.g., Cambois et al. 2012; Chatterji et al. 2015). The concept of successful ageing should be shifted, then, to include successful ageing in the presence of disability. Such data clearly support our perception that successful ageing will remain an issue for

gerontology in the years, and possibly the decades, to come.

Third, it may be asked whether not only the very notion of successful ageing, but also its related risk and protective factors, have changed considerably since the 1960s. For example, are “new” modes of social media on their way to take over the role of traditional social network exchange, and if so, will this lessen or exacerbate feelings of loneliness?

These are all challenging questions that require empirical answers. They also underscore that issues related to successful ageing are likely to remain high on the research priorities of gerontology in the near future, as they should. Correspondingly, we expect that successful ageing will continue to be a frequently addressed theme in our journal. We also expect that work published in the EJA will continue to play an important contributory role in relation to the development of a differentiated understanding of successful ageing. EJA's unique role in this regard, given the wide scope of researchers from a variety of countries submitting papers, may well be the documentation that successful ageing depends on historical and societal influences and does not constitute merely a context-invariant individual phenomenon.

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