

Ya.V. Evseeva

**SUCCESSFUL AGEING: HISTORY
AND STATE OF THE ART¹**

*Institute of scientific information for social sciences
of Russian academy of sciences
Moscow, Russia, yar_evseeva@mail.ru*

Robert Havighurst advanced his concept of successful ageing, understood as life satisfaction continuing into later maturity, in the early 1960 s. Meredith Flood defines successful ageing as an ability to adapt to emerging changes while preserving one's own identity and a meaning of life. According to Pamela Reed, this can be achieved through altruistic behaviour. William Randall suggests that a vital component of the process is irony. Successful ageing may thus prove a fruitful framework for the 21st century.

Keywords: successful ageing; social gerontology; activity theory; disengagement theory; gerotranscendence.

Received: 10.05.2017

Accepted: 17.05.2017

Я.В. Евсеева

Успешное старение: История и современность

*Институт научной информации по общественным наукам РАН
Москва, Россия, yar_evseeva@mail.ru*

В начале 1960-х годов Роберт Хэвигхёрст выдвинул свою концепцию успешного старения, понимаемую как удовлетворение от жизни, продолжающееся и в старшем возрасте. Мередит Флад определяет успешное старение как способность человека адаптироваться к происходящим переменам, сохраняя при этом

¹ The paper was presented at the 3rd ISA Forum of Sociology in Vienna, 10–14 July 2016.

свою идентичность и смысл жизни. Согласно Памеле Рид, этого можно достичь посредством альтруистического поведения. Уильям Рэндалл полагает, что исключительно важной составляющей данного процесса является ирония. Концепция успешного старения может стать плодотворной основой для исследований старения в XXI в.

Ключевые слова: успешное старение; социальная геронтология; теория активности; теория разобщения; геротрансценденция.

Поступила: 10.05.2017

Принята к печати: 17.05.2017

For centuries, thinkers have generated theories on how to age «well», what it would mean to have a good old age. In antique times, there was exclusive knowledge, philosophy; the physical was seen through the metaphysical. The human condition was related to the balance of the elements; warmth (fire) and humidity (water) were regarded as the bosom of life, while with years, a man allegedly grows cold and dry, thus withers and dies. In order to prolong life, one was to eat warm types of food and avoid complete rest; the old age ideal was a sage indulging in speculation and accumulating wisdom, though it was approachable for few. In Christian Middle Ages, the body was subjected to the soul and life was seen in the light of the end; piety would be the main merit of an old person. Alongside medicine still following Galen, there developed alchemy as a mystic way to immortality. Renaissance humanists started to display an interest in the physical body itself, they dreamed of a long life full of vital energy and creativity. In the 15 th century, Gabriele Zerbi published «Gerontocomia», the first treatise on old age care [Zerbi, 1988 (1489)]. Enlightenment became the last epoch when longevity was considered a private matter, to be attained through self-discipline, moderation and diet; in the 19 th century, with the development of modern professional science, life extension became a task for the medical discipline. In the 20 th century, on the base of medical physiology and biology of ageing, a special sphere devoted to old age, gerontology, came into existence.

In some way, the first contemporary theory of successful ageing belongs to Russian biologist Elie Metchnikoff, one of the fathers of gerontology, who also coined the term itself. In «The Nature of Man» [Metchnikoff, 1903] he speaks of the so-called «natural death» emerging as a result of orthobiosis, the full human life cycle (which can be achieved, among other methods, by means of eating products rich in lactic acid bacteria). According to the author, «natural death» can be

experienced by people close to 100, who feel they have lived enough and are ready to die; allegedly, they feel content and do not have any pronounced fear of death.

In the course of, and particularly in the second half of the 20th century, natural sciences developed in the direction of further specialisation of knowledge. Biology of ageing was delving into the microworld, though in the long run it still aimed at prolonging life. One of the theories reaching beyond cells and chemical processes and in fact concerned with positive ageing was elaborated by Ukrainian Soviet gerontologist Vladimir Frolkis [Frolkis, 1988]. The key concept of his adaptive-regulatory theory is *vitaut* (Latin, «life extension»), a phenomenon contrary to physical ageing. As early as the 1920 s, Soviet gerontology had emphasised an importance of compensatory means exercised by the human organism. According to Frolkis, *vitaut* characterises adaptive and reparative capacities of the organism, among them DNA repair, metabolism activation, detoxication, the antihypoxic system. Therefore, one's lifespan is a resultant vector of ageing and anti-ageing; the latter is to be facilitated through physical activity, a low-calorie diet, geroprotectors (antioxidants etc.).

Soviet gerontologists always paid attention to social aspects of ageing; probably due to that fact, there was no need in the region in a special branch like social gerontology. While in Western countries, it was recognised in the mid-20th century that while biology and medicine were making good progress in the sphere in question, social issues of ageing were rather overlooked. In the late 1940 s in the US, under the auspices of the Committee on Social Adjustment in Old Age (founded by the American Social Science Research in 1944) two important texts were published, «Social Adjustment in Old Age» [Pollak, Heathers, 1948] and «Personal Adjustment in Old Age» [Personal adjustment in old age, 1949]. It was then that the term «social gerontology» came into use. Early sociogerontological theories developed within functionalism, a major current in American sociology in the 1940–60 s. The theorist of functionalism, Talcott Parsons, regarded all constituents of society as functions which ought to operate as effectively as possible thus sustaining the whole system. Being normative, functionalist theories prescribed individuals to act in a particular way so that a balance of connections and relations in society may be maintained.

The activity theory became the first sociogerontological theory. Its creators, the most prominent among them Robert Havighurst and

Ruth Cavan, considered individuals' social activity the key to good, effective ageing, as seen in the above-mentioned «Personal Adjustment in Old Age». The main means of realising social activity was labelled adjustment, i.e. modifications one is to make in one's life as circumstances change. Becoming a retiree, a person loses part of his or her social connections, primarily with colleagues. The lost connections are to be substituted with new ones; in order to achieve that, one can find a part-time job, take up a hobby, get involved in volunteering and community work, take on grandparenting responsibilities etc., thus not losing, in later years, the level of activity which was typical of the person in middle age. Otherwise, one supposedly faces «maladjustment». Individual success, activity as a life stand belong to the known values of American culture; the theory in question was also a reflection of the cultural context of the period. In the 1940–50 s, the system of old age benefits was developing, a market of goods and services for older people was on the rise, the first «golden age clubs» and retirement communities were established. Gerontology added to that trend, manifesting an importance of old age, its subject. In 1953, Robert Havighurst and Ruth Albrecht published «Older People» which continued the same line [Havighurst, Albrecht, 1953]; consequently, the whole 1950 s decade was dominated by the activity theory.

A different «ageing well» model was presented in the second sociogerontological theory, the disengagement theory. The foundations of the theory were set forth in the 1961 text «Growing Old: The Process of Disengagement» [Cumming, Henry, 1961]. Its authors, Elaine Cumming and William Henry, saw the optimal and at the same time «natural» scenario of the relations between an older person and society in their gradual mutual alienation. In opposition to the activity theory, Cumming and Henry claimed that not all active individuals were satisfied with their life, and vice versa. According to the disengagement theory, a person, while ageing, keeps drifting away from society, immerses into one's own inner world while society, starting with the family and finishing with power institutions, pays still less and less attention to the person, consigning the latter to oblivion. Eventually, there sets in the final stage of disengagement, death. People who would not give in to the perspective of disengagement were designated by Cumming and Henry as «impingers», that is aggressors encroaching upon the «normal» course of events. On the one hand, the somewhat grave mood of the disengagement theory was a reaction to the excessive op-

timism of the activity theory. On the other hand, forecasts could be heard warning about future competition between the young and the old on the labour market, for material and non-material resources. Older people were supposed to focus on themselves, on their own life, their own leisure and entertainment.

The both fundamental theories were, and have been since then seriously criticised, primarily for their one-sided nature. Although the activity theory became very popular and was later associated with successful ageing, some researchers have protested against the idea of compulsory, «fussy» activity. Canadian sociologist Stephen Katz, presenting Foucauldian criticism of gerontology, regards this imposed activity as a strategy of normalisation supported by the medical and the official discourse as well as a kind of justification for those working with older people [Katz, 1996, 2000]. The disengagement theory was received more coldly. While some of the criticism was constructive, like the idea expressed by American ethnomethodologist Jaber Gubrium that the older generation might only be seen withdrawing from society in Western culture, therefore the theory could not encompass more than one geographical context [Gubrium, 1973], other arguments were merely directed against the alleged negativity of the theory in question. It was mostly not until the 1990 s, when Lars Tornstam's works were published, that there took place a renewal of interest, and a kind of emancipation of the marginal theory [Tornstam, 1999, 2005]. The Swedish researcher, in his own words, after studying the matter and conversations with colleagues as well as interviews with older informants, considered whether gerontology had «thrown the baby out with the bath water» [Tornstam, 2005, p. 34]. This is to say that the disengagement theory might have its rational core, despite its potential drawbacks. In Tornstam's theory, disengagement takes the shape of gerotranscendence, i.e. transition to a new personality level, a different existential state happening in old age. This new state is characterised by a decrease of interest in the material world, refusal of a lifestyle overridden by achievement, focusing on the main, limiting the circle of connections and activities; since the non-material comes to replace the material, a person obtains opportunities for spiritual development and creativity. According to Tornstam, for most older people, gerotranscendence is a rational and desired choice.

Meanwhile, in 1961, in an article published in the first issue of the American journal «The Gerontologist», Robert Havighurst ad-

vanced his original, the first proper concept of successful ageing [Havighurst, 1961]. He understood by it life satisfaction continuing into later maturity, and in his view, it was compatible with both the activity and the disengagement model. Seeing the potential future of the phenomenon in question as «the greatest good for the greatest number» [Havighurst, 1961, p. 8], the author claimed that a person would be ageing successfully if he or she was content with one's past and present, and the years lived were filled with a satisfactory content («adding life to the years», in Havighurst's terminology). Successful ageing became one of the most favoured ideas in social gerontology. Apart from its supposedly positive nature, another reason may consist in the looseness of its definition. Since the 1960 s, it has inspired numerous research projects and has been linked to such affiliated concepts as «healthy», «positive», «productive», «effective», as well as «active» ageing. Although Robert Havighurst himself thought successful ageing applicable to both the activity and the disengagement theory, through the eyes of the majority of the public as well as researchers, the activity theory has appeared considerably closer to successful ageing than its counterpart. The World Health Organisation titled its active ageing program «Add Life to Years», hence referring one to Havighurst's successful ageing formula.

Concepts of successful ageing appeared in various gerontological branches. An important model, known as SOC (selective optimisation with compensation), was developed in the psychology of ageing. According to its author, German developmental psychologist Paul Baltes, life is continuous development – not gradual fading, but rather an interplay of losses and gains. In «Savoir Vivre in Old Age» (written in collaboration with Margaret Baltes), it is stated that the third age offers all opportunities for successful ageing; health issues may arise in the fourth age, but even after 80 one can be active and socially successful [Baltes, Baltes, 1998]. In order to achieve that, one can use such techniques as selection (focusing on the most significant goals), optimisation (improving methods of attaining those goals) and compensation (substituting those methods that are no longer available with different ones). As an example, the authors speak of pianist Arthur Rubinstein (1888–1982) who was long professionally active and as time went by, gave fewer performances (selection), rehearsed more (optimisation) and changed the tempo to produce an impression of a high speed of playing which, in fact, he could no longer keep up (compensation).

The recent concept of successful ageing most researchers refer to when thinking about the phenomenon in question belongs to American gerontologists, physician John Rowe and psychologist Robert Kahn [Rowe, Kahn, 1987, 1998]. In their works, old age is seen as necessarily active. Successful ageing for them means preventing diseases and disability, maintaining physical as well as cognitive functions plus «full engagement in life» (productive activities and rich interpersonal relations) [Rowe, 1997]. Rowe and Kahn make older people responsible for their own physical condition: the more active the latter are, the better should be their health and emotional state. Rowe and Kahn's works became a symbol of the so-called «new gerontology» optimistically focusing on successful ageing rather than seeing old age as a time of failure and disease.

Such is the classic contemporary model of successful ageing. Popular as it is, it evokes criticism. An overview of those critical arguments can be found in the article written by Stephen Katz and his colleague, American feminist gerontologist Toni Calasanti, for the special issue of «The Gerontologist» [Katz, Calasanti, 2015]. Firstly, a considerable part of research on successful ageing rests on gerontologists' idea of what success in old age is, not taking into consideration what it would mean for older people themselves to age successfully. Secondly, regarding successful ageing as people's own responsibility, this discourse ignores power relations in society, environmental issues and other barriers to ageing «well», lying beyond individual choices. Connected with the previous argument are various inequalities due to which some older people, and some groups of older people have fewer resources for successful ageing – women compared to men, minorities vs core population etc. What about people ageing «unsuccessfully»? Elsewhere, Toni Calasanti speaks of anti-ageing propaganda as a demonstration of ageism and criticises her own colleagues for their reluctance to accept an unhealthy, physically unattractive old age [Calasanti, 2005]. Besides, the longer people live, the more health issues they are likely to develop – diseases and disabilities after 85–90 are an objective phenomenon. Successful ageing seems to exclude all those people.

However, in the past years, successful ageing tends to embrace more than is implied in the Rowe-Kahn model, thus many critical arguments aimed against it may be losing their relevance. First of all, ageing successfully does not necessarily mean obligatory physical and social activities, contradicting older people's new physical conditions

and their own wishes. Even activity model enthusiasts now reject this view. British social gerontologist Alan Walker, who has co-authored several WHO active ageing programmes, contends that, in its original variant, the activity theory rather equates older people with energetic middle-aged adults; all older people are hence regarded as potentially active while this is not the case; those less active than their peers should not be left behind; social policy should also pay attention to preventive health care [Walker, 2002]. Belgian researcher Kim Boudini gives an example of people with reduced mobility volunteering over the phone, thus being active enough for their condition [Boudiny, 2013]. Further still, ideas of successful ageing are being spread onto an ever-larger scope of phenomena. American nurse scientist Meredith Flood gives a rather broad definition of successful ageing, as an ability to adapt to occurring changes while maintaining one's own identity and existential meaning [Flood, 2006]. Her colleagues Valerie Lander McCarthy and Amanda Bockweg extend her theory and present «a holistic view of successful ageing» with old age transcendence at the core of it [McCarthy, Bockweg, 2013]. They unite all major sociogerontological theories under the roof of successful ageing claiming that each of them added something important to the whole picture. In the activity theory they appreciate an orientation towards cooperation and altruism, in the disengagement theory the value of solitude and reflection accompanying it, in the continuity theory the idea of ego integrity and self-acceptance, in the life span development theories an attitude towards old age as a qualitatively new life stage which can lead to individuals' full self-realisation. The authors involve into their model Abraham Maslow's idea of self-transcendence as the highest level of human needs, Erik and Joan Eriksons' transcendental ninth stage of psychosocial development and finally Lars Tornstam's gerotranscendence theory. The most encompassing recent approach, in their view, is given in Pamela Reed's theory of self-transcendence, which, according to the author, implies a gradual, usually taking place in old age, widening of the cognitive boundaries of an individual, who surmounts the limited views on one's self, other people and the world [Reed, 2003]. This can be achieved through altruistic behaviour, lifelong learning, creativity, keeping a diary and various forms of sharing wisdom with others. The idea that the positive does not have to be all positive while the negative may be positive in its way, thus uniting activity and disengagement in

transcendence, represents a promising trend in successful ageing theorising.

Successful ageing concepts represent a product of social gerontology in the highest demand. The corresponding discourse is generally forwarded by various international organisations as well as power institutions, particularly in Western countries. To the latter, realisation of successful ageing strategies would mean potential reduction of retirement expenditures and welfare services costs, therefore it constitutes an essential component of many contemporary programmes in the sphere of social policy towards older people. At the same time, conceptually, successful ageing is now more encompassing than ever; it is an endless multitude of particular variations of ageing: successful is that option which is suitable for a particular person. It has somehow come to realise Robert Havighurst's ideal – at least, the way it was formulated: life satisfaction, in the most general manner. This way, successful ageing becomes a broad framework not limited to one particular theory and potentially capable of embracing the whole older population. Both relatively healthy individuals and those with a disability, working and retired, (grand)parents and childless can be said to be ageing successfully if they are content with themselves and their life rather than dissatisfied. In other words, successful ageing is individualised and psychologised; this way, ideas of successful ageing are blurred, which is significant for their terminological, scientific usage. Nevertheless, this reflects modern trends. With the contemporary level of the development of lay cultures, democracy and tolerance, there exist (whatever may be political and economic counterarguments, such as older people as a burden) better foundations for a positive, harmonious, diverse ageing. People are claiming their right for both «graceful» and «disgraceful» ageing, for accepting their own ageing body, also from the point of view of the idea that ageing is not physical fading, but spiritual enrichment: the older the person the more one has gone through, the more vivid is one's experience, the more interesting one's world outlook, whereas physical ageing – say, in the shape of wrinkles – is nothing but a material reflection of the given process. Therefore, while, on the one hand, we can speak of the societal pressure people may be feeling (the cult of youth, beauty standards, technologies oriented at slowing down biological ageing), on the other hand, anyone can follow one's own preferred lifestyle and even become a trendsetter. Authors like Margaret Gullette for whom old age, potentially, is a time of «narrative freedom» [Gullette,

2004] and William Randall appealing to people to cultivate positive irony so that they may get the best of their later years (for it helps one accept the ambiguity of life, be less serious about oneself and eventually one's own end) [Randall, 2013] support such an approach with their works. Contemporary treatment of successful ageing is in line with these trends, thus, still developing, it may prove a fruitful framework for the 21st century.

References

1. *Baltes P.B., Baltes M.M.* Savoir vivre in old age: How to master the shifting balance between gains and losses // National forum. – Baton Rouge (LA), 1998. – Vol. 78, N 2. – P. 13–18.
2. *Boudiny K.* «Active ageing»: From empty rhetoric to effective policy tool // Ageing a. society. – Cambridge, 2013. – Vol. 33, N 6. – P. 1077–1098.
3. *Calasanti T.* Ageism, gravity and gender: Experiences of aging bodies // Generations. – San Francisco (CA), 2005. – Vol. 29, N 3. – P. 8–12.
4. *Cumming E., Henry W.E.* Growing old: The process of disengagement. – N.Y.: Basic books, 1961. – XVI, 293 p.
5. *Flood M.* A mid-range theory of successful aging // J. of theory construction a. testing. – Lisle (IL), 2006. – Vol. 9, N 2. – P. 35–39.
6. *Frolkis V.V.* Starenie i uvelichenie prodolzhitel'nosti zhizni [Ageing and life extension]. – Leningrad: Nauka, 1988. – 239 p. – (In Russian).
7. *Gubrium J.F.* The myth of the golden years: A socio-environmental theory of aging. – Springfield (IL): C.C. Thomas, 1973. – XVII, 225 p.
8. *Gullette M.M.* Aged by culture. – Chicago (IL): Univ. of Chicago press, 2004. – 267 p.
9. *Havighurst R.J.* Successful aging // The Gerontologist. – Oxford, 1961. – Vol. 1, N 1. – P. 8–13.
10. *Havighurst R.J., Albrecht R.E.* Older people. – N.Y.: Longmans, Green, 1953. – XVI, 415 p.
11. *Katz S.* Busy bodies: Activity, aging and the management of everyday life // J. of aging studies. – Amsterdam, 2000. – Vol. 14, N 2. – P. 135–52.
12. *Katz S.* Disciplining old age: The formation of gerontological knowledge. – Charlottesville (VA): Univ. press of Virginia, 1996. – X, 209 p.
13. *Katz S., Calasanti T.* Critical perspectives on successful aging: Does it «appeal more than it illuminates»? // The Gerontologist. – Oxford, 2015. – Vol. 55, N 1. – P. 26–33.
14. *McCarthy V.L., Bockweg A.E.* The role of transcendence in a holistic view of successful aging: A concept analysis and model of transcendence in maturation and aging // J. of holistic nursing. – L., 2013. – Vol. 31, N 2. – P. 84–92.

15. *Metchnikoff E.* The nature of man: Studies in optimistic philosophy. – N.Y.: G.P. Putnam's sons, 1903. – XVII, 309 p.
16. Personal adjustment in old age / Cavan R.S., Burgess E.W., Havighurst R.J., Goldhamer H. – Chicago (IL): Science research associates, 1949. – XIII, 204 p.
17. *Pollak O., Heathers G.* Social adjustment in old age: A research planning report. – N.Y.: Social science research council, 1948. – XI, 199 p.
18. *Randall W.L.* Aging, irony and wisdom: On the narrative psychology of later life // Theory a. psychology. – L., 2013. – Vol. 23, N 2. – P. 164–183.
19. *Reed P.G.* The theory of self-transcendence // Middle range theory for nursing / Ed. by M.J. Smith, P.R. Liehr. – N.Y.: Springer, 2003. – P. 145–165.
20. *Rowe J.W.* The new gerontology // Science. – Wash., 1997. – Vol. 278, N 5337. – P. 367.
21. *Rowe J.W., Kahn R.L.* Human aging: Usual and successful // Science. – Wash., 1987. – Vol. 237, N 4811. – P. 143–149.
22. *Rowe J.W., Kahn R.L.* Successful aging. – N.Y.: Pantheon books, 1998. – XV, 265 p.
23. *Tornstam L.* Gerotranscendence: A developmental theory of positive aging. – N.Y.: Springer, 2005. – XI, 213 p.
24. *Tornstam L.* Late-life transcendence: A new developmental perspective on aging // Religion, belief and spirituality in late life / Ed. by L.E. Thomas, S.A. Eisenhandler. – N.Y.: Springer, 1999. – P. 178–202.
25. *Walker A.C.* A strategy for active ageing // International social security rev. – Hoboken (NJ), 2002. – Vol. 55, N 1. – P. 121–139.
26. *Zerbi G.* Gerontocomia: On the care of the aged. – Philadelphia (PA): American philosophical society, 1988. – 346 p. – (1st ed. 1489).