

GEROTRASCENDENCE: The Contemplative Dimension of Aging

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ABSTRACT: *Open-ended, qualitative interviews were conducted with 50 Swedish men and women, aged 52–97, in order to examine developmental changes in worldview and self-attitudes. Retrospective changes were reported by a number (but not all) of the respondents, reflecting an awareness of a more cosmic dimension of reality, and attitudes reflecting a less narcissistic view of the self. Similarities, and differences between the theory of Gerotranscendence, which has informed this research, and the theory of disengagement, and the works of other personality theorists are discussed, along with implications for understanding the subjective experience of aging.*

In two earlier articles I have described the theoretical basis of the theory of gerotranscendence and empirical support of its validity (Tornstam 1989, 1994). This article takes a closer look at some qualitative aspects of gerotranscendence, after a brief summary of the theory. Drawing on my own studies as well as on theories and observations of others (esp. Jung 1930; Erikson 1950, 1982; Peck 1968; Gutmann 1976; Chinen 1985, 1986, 1989a, 1989b), I have suggested that human aging, the very process of living into old age, is characterized by a general potential towards gerotranscendence. Simply put, gerotranscendence is a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction.

As in Jung's theory of the individuation process, gerotranscendence is regarded as the final stage in a natural progression towards maturation and wisdom. It defines a reality somewhat different from the "normal", mid-life reality which we not seldom tend to project onto old age. Although Bernice Neugarten et al. (1964) early wrote about the

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contemplative nature of the inner lives of old people and Clark and Anderson (1967) described how older people turn away from the competitive values of mid-life, many theories have been based on the assumption that "successful aging" equals continuity and preserving mid-life ideals, activities and definitions of reality (e.g. Rosow 1967; Havens 1968). The theory of gerotranscendence adopts a perspective which emphasizes change and development.

METHOD

The qualitative analysis presented in this article is based on interviews with 50 people between 52 and 97 years of age. After having listened to a lecture on gerotranscendence, these people (out of 500) recognized the phenomena described by the theory in their personal development, and were willing to be interviewed.

The interviews were semi-structured, i.e., some theoretically generated themes were discussed but the conversations had an open format. For each theme, the goal was for the interviewer to guide the conversation as little as possible.

The interviews, lasting from one to three hours, were tape-recorded and transcribed, i.e., they were listened to several times, and their essential parts were identified and written down. The resulting total of 1,250 pages of text constitutes the empirical basis for the present analysis.

Each interview began with an open theme where the respondent simply was asked to tell about changes in attitudes during life. This was followed by specific themes generated by the theory. The analysis as well as the following presentations are organized in terms of some major categories obtained during the open theme interview. The open theme analysis generated three main dimensions of gerotranscendental change; The Cosmic dimension, the Self and the Social and personal relations. It is interesting to note that Achenbaum and Orwoll (1991) reached similar dimensions in a psychogerontological analysis of *The Book of Job*. Job's struggle towards wisdom is described as a developmental change in the transpersonal, intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions.

GEROTRASCENDENCE AND ITS OPPOSITE

Among the 50 respondents some two or three, as exceptions, came to the lecture and agreed to be interviewed, not because they had experienced any development towards gerotranscendence, but because they felt that it might be possible. Thus, the present material offers the possibility to clarify the qualitative content of gerotranscendence by comparing a gerotranscendent and a nongerotranscendent individual.

Eva—Who Has Come a Long Way Towards Gerotranscendence

Eva, formerly a nurse, was 69 years old at the time of the interview. Though not from a poor family, she had a difficult childhood; her upbringing was strict and brutal. She has been married and has three adult children. She experienced a deep crisis in connection with her divorce a number of years ago. She said about this that: "I don't think a person should

ask for crises, but I think that we learn something from the crises we go through.” In answering the open question about whether she has changed her attitudes during life, she described a rather radical change in perspective:

Using an analogy, earlier I used to feel that I was out on a river being carried away by the stream without being able to control it. Even if I wanted to go ashore I couldn’t control it; I was carried away both from pleasant and unpleasant things. But today I feel like the river. I feel like I’m the river. I feel that I’m part of the flow that contains both the pleasant and the unpleasant things.

Eva came back to this type of change several times during the interview. Now, she said, she feels that she “participates in a wider circle, in humanity.”

Her perception of time has also changed. Eva now sees time as circular rather than linear. She realized now that she, in fact, has always lived in a circular timeframe without understanding it. According to Eva, this is particularly true of women:

I mean, she gives birth after 9 months, she has her monthly periods, she hangs out her wardrobe in the spring and brings it in the fall and so on. There are a lot of examples of circularity in women’s lives.

Eva’s circular time also implies that “one always lives with the past and the future” as she put it. In other words, the boundary that we normally draw between past, present and future has been transcended by Eva. She also has strong links with her ancestors, “because I [literally] live very much in the time of my ancestors’ generations, too.” About her feeling of kinship with earlier generations she said: “That’s immortality. The genetic chain that coils.” In this coiling genetic chain, Eva sees a form of eternal life. It is only natural that she does not fear death. “No, it’s quite a natural part of life.”

It is not only the definitions of “the cosmic dimension” that have changed for Eva. Her perception of who she is and wants to be has also changed. She has discovered sides of herself that she is now trying to change:

[...] I wanted to keep things to myself. I wanted my inner space, my integrity. I used to think that integrity depended on keeping as much as possible secret, on not giving yourself away. Also in my relationship to my husband I thought I wanted something that was my own. I think that has changed a lot. Feeling that my integrity doesn’t depend on that. It would have helped my marriage a lot if I’d realized that earlier.

Opening up her enclosed self to the outer world, Eva has achieved an ability to watch herself from the outside. Describing her change she said about her old self that “I couldn’t see myself from the outside.” Now watching her old self from the outside she can see a good deal of self-infatuation:

It was all narcissism. I remember as a girl, lying in the beach touching myself, touching and kissing my skin. Playing with a friend’s hair. I mean, it was all narcissism. This has changed a lot. I’m not the slightest bit worried about my belly or bad skin or the wrinkles in my face. It means nothing to me, nothing at all.

In this statement, Eva not only demonstrates her new insights into herself but also that she has transcended conventions about the body. She does not deny that her body is changing. It does not scare her. She has no need to separate body and mind. In her book "The Ageless self", Kaufman (1986) has introduced this separation between body and mind as part of the normal aging process. The self does not age, only the body. In this perspective, then, Eva's aging is not "normal". For her, changes occur in both body and mind. There is a self developing in an aging body. Eva not only accepts but enjoys this development.

Also in relation to other people, Eva has become a different person. She is more open to other people today. At the same time, she has become more restrictive in her choice of friends and company. She has abandoned the big circle of friends:

[...] I think it's more fun to ... I go to an older woman that I know, sit and talk to her. I get much more out of this than going to parties and being with a lot of people where you really don't talk so much with people. Being with a lot of people used to involve a good deal of make believe and disguise.

I somehow walked around and played 'The discreet charm of the bourgeoisie,' and I did it well. [...] I adjusted a great deal to the roles people expected me to play. I have been a very well-behaved little middle-class girl, but I'm not anymore.

Having the courage to be herself, Eva today dares to say and do things that she did not dare to earlier—out of fear of breaking the rules and embarrassing herself. "I'm old enough and wise enough to dare to do dumb things," Eva said.

However, when asked if it has become easier with age to make wise decisions and give good advice to other people, Eva answered:

Well, it's easier to make both dumb and wise decisions, but there is one thing that I find easier today. That is to refrain from giving good advice.

Eva thinks that deciding what is good and what is bad is not as easy as it used to be, particularly where other people are concerned. But, she is happy and satisfied with her life today.

With all these changes in her attitudes, Eva has also noticed that the sources of joy in life have changed:

Well, earlier it may have been things like a visit to the theater, a dinner, a trip. I wanted certain things to happen that I was a little excited about. [...] My best times [now are] when I sit on the kitchen porch and simply exist, the swallows flying about my head like arrows. Or a spring day like this when I can go to my nettle patch and pick nettles for soup.

Greta—Who Seems To Be Stuck in Her Development

A person who is not satisfied with life is Greta. Greta is a former school-teacher, 72 years of age at the time of the interview. She grew up in a quiet and safe middle-class environment, but her mother died when Greta was only 13 years old.

Greta has been a widow for several years and has two adult sons. She also had a daughter, but the girl died at 15 years of age. Her husband, who was very domineering, died when the children were in their first school years.

Thus, like Eva, Greta has gone through difficulties in her life, but she does not seem to have been able to turn them into something positive. The crises in her life have been compounded. Answering the open question about whether she may have changed her attitude towards life and herself, she told about how meaningless life became after she retired:

I thought that, as a senior citizen I would be active, have adventures, but this just hasn't happened. It's like my feet have been knocked out from under me, I'm surprised that I gave up that easy. I quickly fell into a life as a senior that is rather pointless for me. [...] I miss my work a lot. I miss the satisfaction of working.

Greta has not experienced any considerable changes in perspective when it comes to her view of herself and the surrounding world. Rather, she seems to cling firmly to mid-life ideals and definitions of reality. She evaluates herself within these frames of reference and arrives at discouraging conclusions:

When I watch myself it's mostly disappointing. Now I'm rather disinterested, unfortunately. I feel that I've used up my supply of ..., I'm afraid I have used up my supply of interest in other people and things like that.

As Greta told her story, it sounded as if she had given up. Her interests and perspectives had not changed much, they had just ceased.

About her relationships to other people, Greta said:

I've had an enormous social network but it's also ..., I think I have [...] I'm not interested anymore, Disengaged and disinterested.

Perhaps the cause of her disinterest is that she is still stuck in the patterns of middle-age life. Measured in terms of middle-age performance ideals, neither Greta herself nor other senior citizens are worth much. Greta was to the point when she said: "I'm not fond of seniors but, of course, I don't need to be." It is evident that Greta includes herself in the category of people that she does not like. Greta is not satisfied with her life.

The comparison between Eva and Greta might lead to the conclusion that Eva has succeeded, in the terminology of Erikson (1986), in attaining ego integrity in the face of despair, while Greta has not. But, there is more to it. Instead of just attaining a balance between ego integrity and despair, Eva transcends such opposites. For example, Eva's whole perspective has changed from floating powerlessly in "the river of life" to being the river itself. She is not just balancing the possible despair of being even more powerless in old age; she transcends it. Eva has also transcended the conventional way of perceiving one's body. She has no need to separate body and mind. Again, this means more than just balancing or coping with an ageless self in an aging body. Instead, she transcends the duality of the two.

THE DIMENSIONS OF GEROTRASCENDENCE

In our interviews, mainly based on individuals who may have come further than others, some rather distinct dimensions and aspects of gerotranscendence did arise during the analysis. This does not mean that every subject was characterized by all these aspects. Some of the aspects of gerotranscendence were recognized by most of the informants while some were recognized by just a few. In this short article I will only touch upon the aspects which emphasize a new qualitative understanding of the developmental processes of aging. A full description of the qualitative content of gerotranscendence will be given in a forthcoming volume edited by Thomas and Eisenhandler (forthcoming).

THE COSMIC DIMENSION

Earlier we saw that Eva had changed her definition of time. The change in the concept of time is one of the dimensions subsumed under the heading "the cosmic dimension." The interviewer introduced the time concept theme in the following way:

Some people say that they have gradually come to a concept of time which is different from the one they had before. They say that, in early life and adulthood, they had a very clear idea of what is today and what belongs to yesterday, but that it has changed and they feel like they are able to be in two time periods at once. Their past may be present so strongly that they almost live in it, at the same time as they live in the present. Is this something that you recognize?

"Only" a third of the respondents answered "yes" to the specific question while the majority moved over into reports on how childhood has come more alive in older days.

The fact that people, irrespective of any transcendence of time, begin to think more about childhood experiences and places is well illustrated by the 86 year old woman who said:

You go back to childhood almost daily. It comes without reflection. I talked to a good friend about this. [...] We both go back to the town where we grew up [in our thoughts]. [...] Childhood means much more than one thinks, I go back to it all the time.

A 79 year old woman expressed a similar view saying that it both pleases and scares her: Now I'm almost 80 and now I dare to remember my childhood." She added:

The older you get, the more you remember of your childhood. There's a dangerous trap in this. I have heard about that all my life.

Thus, when she realized that recalling the experiences of childhood was beginning to mean a lot to her, she became frightened. She interpreted it as a negative sign of her own aging: "I have heard about that all my life." Thus, the pleasure that this woman finds in recalling her childhood is offset by the negative interpretation of "returning to childhood" that she has internalized. The descriptions of transcendence of the time dimension, and the importance of childhood, in several cases drifted over to another theme, namely the relation to earlier generations of people. A 72 year old man describes how the distance to the 17th century has decreased:

If we take the 17th century, it used to be (earlier, in my younger years) tremendously distant, but today I don't think that the 17th century is all that far away. It is somehow as if it has come nearer. And everything in history has come nearer.

We also recall that Eva perceived "the coiling genetic chain" as her immortality. In these cases, the feeling of kinship and affinity with earlier generations has been expressed in more general terms. In one case as diminishing distance to previously living people, in the other case as a definition of immortality.

In the interview the interviewer introduced a theme more directly related to the respondents' own ancestors:

Some people say that, during the course of life, they experience a change in how they feel in relation to their ancestors. It's a kind of increasing kinship with those who lived earlier, a feeling that you are a link in the chain of generations. Have you experienced this?

This theme provoked many reactions in the respondents. The most prominent was the many reports about the wakening interest in genealogy. Several respondents had begun to seek their roots in this tangible manner.

When describing their feelings of increased kinship with earlier generations, respondents used expressions or metaphors showing that the kinship with ancestors has a very strong appeal.

"It's the desire under the elms, you know," said a 65 year old woman referring to an old movie classic. "Yes, yes, it is almost a religious feeling," said a 71 year old man.

When talking about understanding life and what it is all about, a common response was that ordinary language is sometimes preventing us from insight and understanding. Language constrains us to a certain form of understanding, a 71 year old man said, and implying that transcending the barriers of language gives rise to new forms of awareness. He gave as examples music and painting which may allow forms of understanding beyond those that can be expressed through language. The respondent had discovered music as a "gateway" to new insights. Similar experiences were related by a 77 year old man who, however, kept them at a distance in front of the interviewer.

[...] one is, of course, a little softer now than before in certain situations. Above all pretty music. The tears flow almost, well, my eyes get moist at least. There are other situations, too ..., like drama and music. It wasn't like that before. But now it's a block that's breaking down. [...] you experience it as a sort of euphoria, feeling of happiness. It has come during the last few years.

Regarded superficially, it may seem as though the man has simply become more interested in music or just has become more tender-hearted. The real meaning of these new transcendental sources of happiness can go deeper, however. The respondent himself says that it is a block that is breaking down. The experience of music borders on something that has previously been sealed off. Now, however, this block is broken through—it is transcended.

When the interview touched upon the joys of life and how these may have changed, there were many answers that can be seen as related to the example above. The transcendent Eva

and many others said that earlier it was the more spectacular events that gave joy in life, but that now it is more a question of small and commonplace things. These are, as in the case of Eva, often events and experiences in nature.

Instead of assuming that such changes are adaptations to decreasing possibilities in life one must ask whether the increasing interest in the small everyday experiences, such as nature, does not have a deeper significance. A 58 year old man describes what it may be about:

I see trees, buds, and I see it blossom, and I see how the leaves are coming—I see myself in the leaves.

The experience of nature evokes the feeling of being at one with the universe, which is called "at-one-ment" in the Eastern tradition. The increasing significance of these small everyday experiences could therefore be interpreted as a way in which the barrier between the self and the universe is transcended. This transcendent quality of experiences of nature offers a new way of understanding the increased interest in nature and gardening expressed by many older people. Old peoples interest in their garden is often interpreted in other ways, seen as a sort of therapy or a way to fill up their otherwise idle lives.

THE SELF

The theory of gerotranscendence assumes that the self of the individual is gradually changing and developing. In this regard, the theory contrasts sharply with theories which assume that the self, like the perception of the self, is constant and ageless. The constancy of perception of the self is partly dependent on the degree to which we discover the hidden aspects of our personality, what Jung calls the shadow. This theme was introduced in the following way:

Some people say that, during the course of life, they have begun to discover sides of themselves that they hadn't known before, both positive and negative. Do you recognize any of this in yourself?

Our respondents reported that they had discovered both positive and negative sides of themselves in their older years. An 85 year old respondent discovered a literary talent. Another respondent discovered that she is actually a cheerful, light-hearted person, while still another respondent realized that she is more serious than she had once thought. Yet another respondent said that what he had earlier considered positive carefulness in his personality was in fact an exaggerated pedantry.

The latter case is not about discovering new qualities in oneself but rather about redefining qualities that were already known. Another example of this redefinition of qualities is given by a 72 year old man who used to think that his driving force was engagement and empathy, but who now understands that it was pure performance anxiety that drove him.

The most common discovery or redefinition, however, is about relationships to other people. Respondents described an egocentricity that they had previously been unconscious of. The 69 year old woman who earlier in life thought that she had an unselfish interest in her children, has now discovered that it was really about something else:

I have been much too domineering. [...] I kind of forced myself on them in a way. I talked very egoistically about how I was doing. It was me all the time. [...] I never listened to my children. Today I can listen.

In summary, our interviews do not confirm the idea of an “ageless self.” On the contrary, we find that almost everybody tells about changing and developing selves.

Social and Personal Relationships

A pilot assumption of the theory of gerotranscendence has been that what can superficially be interpreted as “social disengagement” could be understood as changes in point of view, shifts of emphasis and redefinitions of the meaning of social relations. Given this assumption the following theme was introduced:

Some people say that their interest in other people changes character during the course of life. One becomes more selective and prefers deeper relationships with a few people rather than more superficial relationships with many people. Is this something that you recognize?

Some respondents said that they had not changed in this regard, but an even greater number of respondents said that they had. The changed need for glamorous social company is well illustrated by the following statement by an 86 year old woman:

I used to dance at the spring ball; I enjoyed it enormously. No, it's a tremendous difference. Now, a few friends are quite enough, that's for sure. So [now] I have much greater need for solitude. It's striking. It's extremely sufficient to meet and ..., just a few people, to sit down and talk. [...] One doesn't need so many.

The increased need for positive solitude, in contrast to loneliness, is evident in the above quotation, as in the reports of many other respondents. A 77 year old man said:

I appreciate solitude more now. You know, you become fed up with company faster. And you feel that a lot of talking is just nonsense. [...] You long for home and a good book instead, or to put on a record.

It appears clearly in these and other interviews that we are not dealing with a kind of passive withdrawal, as a young observer may easily think. It is rather about changes in the importance of social relationships. They shed the company and activities that lack content, they become more selective, preferring literature or music, or a few friends. Not because of lack of possibilities, but of choice.

A frequent theme in many of the open themes was an almost roguish delight in breaking away from the role expectations that were earlier seen as compelling. A 68 year old woman related:

Now I don't care a bit about what people think. [...] I dare to go out biking or walking in [X-town] wearing torn stockings, I couldn't do that before. [...] Sometimes I think, but I really can't do this, you know ... but I do it anyway.

The delight in doing things that one did not earlier dare to do falls most closely into the theme that we, following Chinen (1989a), have called "emancipated innocence". It refers to a capacity to break away from certain social conventions. A new kind of innocence and spontaneity is added to adult judgment and rationality. This allows important feelings and questions to be expressed regardless of the barriers of social conventions.

A special quality of this new attitude seems to be that people can admit that they do not know about something without feeling embarrassed. It is not only a question of not caring about making a fool of oneself, it also involves the recognition that an admission of ignorance is far from foolish. A 60 year old man said:

Previously I had to read the newspaper in order to keep up with what was going on, in order to have something ... well, people should not be able to attack me because I didn't know this or that. Today I read the newspaper only when I feel like it. [...] I no longer have the need to pretend to know more than I do.

This change is connected with other, parallel changes. A 72 year old man associated his new capacity of emancipated innocence with his decreasing interest in his own prestige:

Since I don't care about prestige anymore I don't feel it's such a big deal to make a fool of myself once in a while ..., I used to take that very seriously, if I said something stupid at a meeting or something like that.

Following the logic in the statements above, I assumed that practical everyday wisdom increases with age. This was the point of departure when the following theme was introduced:

Some people think that it has become easier and easier to make wise decisions and help others to make decisions. What is your experience of this?

A number of respondents answered in a way that makes an assumption in the question explicit, namely that it is possible to distinguish between wise and unwise decisions. The respondents often reached the conclusion that it has become more difficult to identify the boundary between wise and unwise.

Given the experience that the boundaries between right and wrong, wise and unwise are transcended, the consequence for everyday wisdom is to refrain from giving advice or helping others to make decisions. The transcendent Eva said that what she had learned above all was to refrain from giving "good" advice. In a similar vein, an 80 year old woman said:

I guess I used to think that I always made good decisions and gave good advice, too. I have been in a situation where I have had to give a lot of advice. [...] I had no problem with it. How is it now? I guess I must say that I avoid giving advice. I suppose I have learned that what I think is wise for me can be very unwise for others.

Another way of expressing this new approach is in terms of an increased broad-mindedness, tolerance and humility in response to other people's behavior. Tolerance and acceptance of other people's views have increased. A 78 year old man said that:

[...] I guess I used to have strong views of everything, but I don't today. I understand that it's not ..., it is not so simple, it depends.

In these reports everyday wisdom is expressed by avoiding both giving good advice and helping people make decisions. The origin of this form of everyday wisdom is the transcendence of the boundary between right and wrong accompanied by and increased broad-mindedness and tolerance.

DISCUSSION

The need for and the pleasure of contemplative positive solitude is highly evident in our interviews. The need and search for a positive solitude is, however, not the same as loneliness and disengagement. Rather, it is part of a development where one has become more selective. This eventually touches on a question which is essential, namely that the developmental changes described by our interviewees could be given different interpretations. One set of interpretations stems from "traditional" gerontological theories, while other interpretations are rooted in a different paradigm as offered by the theory of gerotranscendence.

The decreasing interest to participate in certain social and personal relationships could, from a "traditional" perspective, be regarded as a negative disengagement, or as part of a social breakdown syndrome. At least among our informants, the meaning of this behavior must be interpreted quite differently—as part of a positive developmental change. In the same vein, the "emancipated innocence" could be regarded as a mental breakdown symptom, while our interviews suggest it should be interpreted as parts of a positive transcendence of social conventions.

Thus our interviews support earlier empirical results (Tornstam 1994), which show that these and other aspects of gerotranscendence form, for the individual, coherent developmental patterns, where high degrees of life satisfaction and absence of depression and neurotic symptoms are parts. The conclusion must be that the "traditional" interpretations have a limited scope. Some times the traditional interpretations of behaviors like the above mentioned may be appropriate, sometimes they may be totally wrong. A new understanding, as offered by the theory of gerotranscendence, might be more intelligible.

The developmental perspective in the theory of gerotranscendence is certainly, as I have argued (Tornstam 1996), qualitatively very different from the old disengagement theory. But what about its relationship to Erikson's (1950, 1982, 1986) model of personal development?

As I see it, the theory of gerotranscendence goes beyond that theory. In both cases the process of aging is regarded as a developmental process which, at very best, ends with a higher state of maturity—in Erikson's case ego-integrity, in mine gerotranscendence. In Erikson's theory, the ego-integrity primarily refers to an integration of the elements in the life that has passed. The individual reaches a fundamental acceptance of the life lived. In this way the ego-integrity described by Erikson becomes more of a backwards integration process within the same definition of the world as before, while the process of gerotranscendence implies more of a forward or outward direction, including a qualitative redefinition of reality.

To conclude, then, I suggest that the theory of gerotranscendence offers a new understanding of aging, qualitative different from other well know theoretical concepts in gerontology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: This work has been stimulated to a great extent by seminars within The Social Gerontological Group at the Department of Sociology, Uppsala University, The social gerontological group is comprised of, beside the author: Gunhild Hammarstrom, Ph.D., associate professor; Marianne Winquist, BA, certificated psychologist; Peter Oberg, M.SSc., Fereshteh Ahmadi, Ph.D., Sandra Torres, M.SSc. The work has been funded by The Swedish Council for Social Research and the Faculty of Social Science, Uppsala University.

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