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“Successful Aging,” Gerontological Theory and Neoliberalism: A Qualitative Critique

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This article is a critique of the successful aging (SA) paradigm as described in the Rowe and Kahn book, *Successful Aging* (1998). The major point of this article is that two key ideas in the book may be understood as consonant with neoliberalism, a social perspective that came into international prominence at the same time the SA paradigm was initially promoted. These two key ideas are (a) the emphasis on *individual social action* applied to the nature of the aging experience and (b) the failure to provide a detailed policy agenda for the social and cultural change being promoted and, particularly, for older adults who may be left behind by the approach to change the book suggests. The article provides no evidence for a direct connection between SA and neoliberalism, but rather shows how similarities in their approaches to social change characterize both of them. In sum, the article shows (a) how the implicit social theory developed in the book, in a manner similar to neoliberalism, elevates *the individual* as the main source of any changes that must accompany the SA paradigm and (b) the focus on SA as individual action does not provide for those older adults who do not or will not age “successfully.” This, we conclude, implicitly sets up a two-class system of older adults, which may not be an optimal means of addressing the needs of all older adults. The article also reviews a number of studies about SA and shows how these, too, may emphasize its similarities to neoliberalism and other issues that the SA paradigm does not adequately address.

Key words: Culture, Successful aging, Well-being

Rowe and Kahn (1998) established the *successful aging paradigm* as a focus on three components of well-being,

“low probability of disease,” and disability, “high cognitive and physical ... capacity, and active engagement with life”

(1998, p. 433). The book concerns three questions about aging: “What does it mean to age successfully? What can each of us do to be successful at this most important life task? What changes in American society will enable more men and women to age successfully?” (1998, p. xi). In our view, the book deals most successfully with the second of these questions, to a lesser extent the first (by focusing on the three components of well-being listed earlier), and least successfully with the final question. This response to the second question relies primarily on the domain of individual action as the primary motivational principle for the achievement of successful aging (SA). Thus, a key point of the book is that it is *individual action* that determines one’s future as a successful older person. As we will describe subsequently, Rowe and Kahn note that SA “can be attained through individual choice and effort” (1998, p. 37). The goal of the Rowe and Kahn work was to vastly improve the lives of older adults. However, the approach they take does not address two important things. First, the book does not address how an individual’s biography, personal meanings, or lifetime experiences might relate to SA outcomes. For example, the book does not address situations that may include a history of trauma; social or personal suffering; lack of access to resources or medical care; early-life violence or other difficulties; or continuing economic or social marginality. This is not to say that people cannot overcome these experiences and age successfully, but in some cases, they may need help to do so, and such support is not at all addressed in the book. Second, the book does not address any social mechanism that might promote the individual changes required to age successfully, other than a person’s own actions (Callero, 2009). The third question that Rowe and Kahn raise is addressed only through a very brief discussion of social and cultural changes that might be necessary to effect SA, but we would suggest that the changes required are in fact massive and go beyond the level of individual action.

The book gives no analysis of a social, cultural, or political economic foundation that might provide the larger context for individual motivation. Further, it does not place itself, as an implicit theory of old age or aging, in any larger context, although one may of course relate the SA paradigm to the perception of the increased number of older adults who are living longer and who continue to lead productive lives and to fears of what it might in fact cost for these people to live. Although we can recall the context of the 1980s and 1990s in which the theme of intergenerational conflict and the ideology of the “greedy geezers” was more prominent, the book does not overtly address intergenerational conflict. Dillaway and Byrnes (2009), however, describe a history of the SA paradigm, now ubiquitous in gerontology, and offer an analysis of it by sketching out “a more thorough critique of the sociopolitical contexts of the successful

aging paradigm” (2009, p. 702). They note that recent critiques have had no effect on the ubiquity and prominence of the SA paradigm in gerontology, perhaps due to the newness of the critiques, and they urge scholars to explore the meaning of recent critiques of the SA paradigm for a better gerontology. They summarize the critiques of the SA paradigm as of greater significance to the privileged and “exclusionary” in nature, the approaches we also discuss here. They suggest that one implication of SA terminology is that “society does not have to provide support for those who fail at aging” (p. 708). In this article, we point out the similarity of this conclusion to the actual sociopolitical effects of neoliberalism. Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) call “attention to the fact that the successful aging paradigm arose directly out of political and biomedical networks in the United States and was defined primarily by just a few individuals (perhaps only one or two)” (p. 708). Dillaway and Byrnes trace the origins of the SA paradigm to earlier work on productive aging and a move away from a view of older adults as “passive and dependent” (p. 710). However, they also suggest that in part the SA paradigm was developed to serve medical business interests, and they place the development of the SA paradigm in the larger context of earlier political disputes about the Federal budget and increasingly “[c]onsistent expression of values aligned with market ideologies” (p. 712). They relate this to attempts to raise the retirement age and promote longer work lives for elders. A point made by Dillaway and Byrnes, that the SA paradigm encourages “paid work activity” (p. 712) is not consonant with what is stated in the Rowe and Kahn book, which tries to promote the value of *unpaid* work for older adults, a topic we would discuss subsequently. They note that they cannot prove that the SA paradigm “resulted directly from specific political climates and settings” (p. 713), but they find “subtle encouragement” from certain conservative political ideologies for the development of the SA paradigm; we, too, draw an analogy of neoliberalism to SA specifically through their methodologies and their neglect of possible negative effects of social change. Although the SA paradigm may have been developed to depose the image of older adults as needy and dependent, the paradigm itself may actually end up neglecting those older adults truly in need through introduction of an implicit two-class system in which needs of those in the underclass (“the unsuccessful”) are not attended. Dillaway and Byrnes (2009) write that “[m]any scholars now critique successful aging terminology” and that there is “an incomplete analysis of the political motivations behind the development of and/or effects of widespread use of these terms” (p. 702), although many scholars have offered critiques of it (Estes & Binney, 1989; Holstein & Minkler, 2003).

The purpose of this article is to provide some context for “the SA paradigm” so that it can be more easily grounded in

significant social theory. To be sure, it is undeniably a good idea that people age “successfully” (whatever that might mean) and with good health, but as the literature on SA now shows, there are many ways people might do this. We must also seriously consider the implications of important work such as that by [McLaughlin, Connell, Heeringa, Li, and Roberts \(2010\)](#) who found that only 12% of senior adults age successfully in any 1 year by the Rowe and Kahn criteria. They note that disparities in SA were apparent for many subpopulations in their sample, “highlighting the importance of structural factors in enabling successful aging” (p. 216).

Background

In re-reading the Rowe and Kahn book, there is a major question that is never addressed. That question is, who is this book really about? For example, is it about all older adults everywhere as a group, all American older adults, all older adults as individuals, relatively well-to-do older adults, or certain select individuals who share (or do not share) the three characteristics that define SA from the authors’ perspective?

The observation that there is no explanation in the book for how social changes are to come about is also true of the vast amount of literature on SA that has appeared since then, much of which we reviewed for this article. The book suggests that many individuals need to change in order to become successful agers, but there is no explanation for how this is to come about. Nowhere does the quest to become successfully aged seem to be related to any public policy program (given subsequently). There is no specific discussion of how social support or involvement might in fact be meaningfully attained by those who lack it. Again, when one searches for what the underlying dynamic of the concepts outlined in this book are, one is led to conclude that it speaks primarily to the *centrality of individuals* and to individual effort as the basis of SA. So, what are we to make of this finding?

The “SA Paradigm” and Neoliberalism

The edition of the Rowe and Kahn book we are referring to here was published in 1998, but its origins trace to the 1980s ([Dillaway and Byrnes, 2009](#)). In a way, the book concerns a powerful contemporaneous shift across political and economic domains to *the individual* as the locus of action, health, and efficacy in both public and private lives. Thus, in our view, the shift to a focus on the individual as the locus of responsibility for SA mirrors precisely the shift in political economic theory that occurred nationally and internationally ([Greenhouse, 2010](#)) at the same time, namely the shift to a *neoliberal* analysis of human motives and social and economic behavior. In our view, the book

can in part be viewed as a reflection to a degree of a neoliberal perspective. The audience for the book does not appear to be poor people, but rather persons with such resources as would enable them to make the individual changes suggested. The reason that there is no discussion of the social sources of care in the Rowe and Kahn book is, we believe, that it mirrors the idea of the individual as the locus of social action, so much a part of neoliberal theory. Again, we point out that there is no direct connection of the SA paradigm to neoliberalism that appears in view but that there is a connection through the methodologies proposed and through the discounting of those who are not successful. As we will note subsequently, Rowe and Kahn state (1998, p. 18), “Our main message is that we can have a dramatic impact on our own success or failure in aging. Far more than is usually assumed, successful aging is in our own hands.” The onus is on the individual.

There is by now a vast literature on neoliberalism, but it is useful for this article to review some of the key elements. [Brown \(2003, p. 1\)](#) writes that, “[i]n popular usage, neo-liberalism is equated with a radically free market,” but also “a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent toward poverty ... [and] ... cultural decimation.” [Greenhouse \(2010, p. 1\)](#) notes that neoliberalism is characterized by “ideological coherence around the primacy of the private sector, the release of organizations and industries from government regulation ... and the assurance of the market’s self-regulating character.” She notes that as social theory, it gives “a vision of ‘society’ as the cumulative product of free individuals, loose of all but the most necessary constraint by the state.” Thus, neoliberalism is predominantly associated with the ongoing shift from public to private ownership that began in the 1980s; the shift of risk from the state or government to the individual; the continuing attempt to downsize or privatize established social care; the changes in governmental support for health and well-being; the increasing income inequality; and, most significantly, an increasing focus on the individual as the locus of social action and motive.

[Miller and Rose \(2008\)](#) provide some insight into the effects of neoliberalism as they coalesce around the individual. They note (2008, pp. 24–25) in discussing advanced liberal democracies that they “seek to govern not through ‘society’, but through the regulated choices of individual citizens, now constructed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfillment “ a characteristic that seems to resonate with the social theory of SA. They also note (p. 84), “it seemed as if we were seeing the emergence of a range of rationalities and techniques that seek to govern without governing society, to govern through regulated choices made by discrete and autonomous actors.” This in a way seems very similar to what is

proposed in the Rowe and Kahn book. This suggests one product of SA would be a division among older adults, fitting with the observation that very little literature on SA discusses “unsuccessful agers,” those denizens of a Third-Age underclass or the Fourth Age.

We see in the focus of Rowe and Kahn what is essentially a self-help book, unsupported by any explicit theory about human behavior but with an implicit theory about the action of individuals. Anthropologist Sahlins (2004) puts the neoliberal focus on the individual this way: “rational choice theory and other such brands of radical individualism, all contend to resolve social totalities into the projects of self-fashioning individuals” (p. 142). He further notes, “In radical individualism, the society is preserved in its negation, included as the source of the values ... that appears in consciousness and economic science as the intentions of individuals. Society becomes mystified as the preferences and satisfactions of individual rational volition in order to reappear as the result thereof” (p. 143). Thus, he says there is a radical separation of person from society within the brand of individualism formulated under *the ideology of neoliberalism* that masks the influence of social forces and cultural constructs on individuals.

The effects of neoliberalism have been profound. Greenhouse (2010, p. 2) notes, “Neoliberal reform – now a generation or more in the making – has restructured the most prominent public relationships that constitute *belonging*: politics, markets, work, self-identity. These are the critical forms of social connection that neoliberalism’s emphasis in the separation of state and society, and the marketization of their relation puts in doubt – in everyday life and as matters of social theory.”

These preoccupations leads to the elevation of individual choice over collective action, and prioritizes individualism over traditional collective means of political activity.”

Analyzing the Rowe and Kahn Book From the Perspective of Neoliberalism

The Rowe and Kahn work begins impressively with a summary of the negative attitudes that have plagued older people. They list and critique a number of key, pervasive myths about aging in America. They find that measures of productivity among older adults are wrong in part because they do not include the great amount of volunteerism and other productive work of older adults including retirees: “We propose one way of making it more attractive to volunteer: start counting voluntary work as productive. The ways we measure productive activity are broken; fix them!” (p. 34). This reminds one of Austin’s (1976) definitions of an illocutionary speech act, such as giving an order, in which, by saying something, something is done. But how this change is to be brought about is

never discussed other than through assertion. Who, exactly, is doing this counting, how it is to be done, and how it is to become culturally central are never made clear. There is no actual plan for transforming the cultural value of volunteer, unpaid work among retirees or other older adults so that it becomes equivalent to the value granted to paid work. Rowe and Kahn state (1998, p. 13), “Acknowledging the truth about aging in America is critical, however, if we are to move ahead toward successful aging as individuals and as a society.” Again, there is no connection made between the individual and society, except that which relates to a perspective in which society is defined only by its varied constituent individuals, not by age-based, family-based, ethnic, cultural, social, gender, work-based, religious, economic, or other groupings and divisions or by informed public policy, which have figured in most gerontological work.

Explaining Some Key Points in *Successful Aging: Poverty*

As noted, Rowe and Kahn conclude that SA consists of three elements: “low probability of disease” and disability, “high cognitive and physical ... capacity, and active engagement with life” (1998, p. 433). Significantly, they find that all of these characteristics can be improved in later life through individual responsibility and effort. Given this approach, it is difficult then to understand several of the statements they make. For example, they write, “Successful aging does not refer to prosperity, although poverty certainly makes its attainment more difficult” (p. 37). If these three elements are what define SA, why should poverty have an influence on them? The relationship of poverty and SA is never made clear. Does it have something to do with high cognitive capacity or probability of disease or engagement with life, which do not seem to be inherently tied to the experience of poverty? If so, should poverty or economic security not be factored into a definition or discussion of SA? This statement by Rowe and Kahn is almost a throw-away, a painful realization that poverty might ultimately have something to do with how successfully one can age. However, nothing else is said about it and no mechanisms that might connect poverty to aging are discussed; even various types of poverty that might influence how successfully one might age in later life are not mentioned, for example, later life poverty itself, poverty after widowhood, life-long poverty, or early childhood poverty. The question of how one might overcome such decrements is clearly of central significance in defining how a person might age successfully.

Early-Life Influences of SA

Indeed, the question of an earlier life connection to SA in later life is unfortunately ignored in this foundational book.

The discourse promoted by Rowe and Kahn is that an individual can change their life dramatically *from today forward* by attending to improvement of those aspects of life defined as key elements of SA. As we noted earlier, Rowe and Kahn state (1998, p. 17), “[w]e can, and should, take some responsibility for the way in which we grow older.” They add (1998, p. 18), “Our main message is that we can have a dramatic impact on our own success or failure in aging. Far more than is usually assumed, successful aging is in our own hands.” Here, Rowe and Kahn introduce the notion of failed aging, which we will discuss subsequently.

Research since the publication of *Successful Aging* has clearly shown that earlier life events have a profound impact of how people age. Brandt, Deindl, and Hank (2012, p. 1418) found “an independent association of childhood living conditions with elders’ odds of aging well. Higher parental socioeconomic status, better math and reading skills, as well as self-reports of good childhood health, were positively associated with successful aging ... Moreover, lower levels of income inequality were associated with a greater probability of meeting Rowe and Kahn’s SA criteria.” Similarly, Schafer and Ferraro (2012) found childhood misfortune to be a threat to SA. The question, of course, would be whether the level of health in later life that was shaped by childhood misfortune would be sufficient for someone to be labeled as successfully aging. Britton, Shipley, Singh-Manoux, and Marmot (2008) also found that midlife social position strongly predicted SA in later life.

Successful Versus Unsuccessful Aging

One of the social consequences of neoliberalism has been to create a more intense system of inequality in those nations in which neoliberal transformation has taken place. Income inequality is one of the central public policy issues in the United States at this time due to the changes that have occurred in public support for health and welfare; wealth redistribution to a very small minority due to regressive tax codes and selective investment opportunities; an increase in corporate power; privatization of public services; and political fractioning and legislative stalemate. A concern in much writing about neoliberalism worldwide has been the creation of new classes with extreme wealth and the creation of a new, immobilized poor class without much chance of upward mobility, a transformation that has also greatly affected American society. What is generally known about neoliberal adjustment is that those who are disfavored by such changes receive diminished or little attention from public media and government. The same is certainly true for any persons who might end up labeled as aging unsuccessfully (those left out of the SA paradigm), which research, cited earlier, has shown to be numerous.

One of the unrecognized aspects of the Rowe and Kahn SA paradigm has been the unconscious creation of a class of those who age unsuccessfully. One of the unfortunate side aspects of this is that the discourse of SA, due to its polarizing language and expectation of individual initiative, inherently suggests that those who age unsuccessfully do so apparently because it is their own fault. They have not taken up the challenge. Rowe and Kahn note, “To succeed in something requires more than falling into it; it means having desired it, planned for it, worked for it. All these factors are critical to our view of aging which, even in this era of human genetics, we regard as largely under the control of the individual. In short, successful aging is dependent on individual choices and behaviors. It can be attained through individual choice and effort” (1998, p. 37; given earlier). Rowe and Kahn (1998, p. 38) also noted that “[c]ertainly freedom from disease and disability is an important component of successful aging.” They described the important social and cultural contributions of such persons as Stephen Hawking, Mother Theresa, and Franklin Roosevelt (1998, pp. 38–39) by noting that “[w]e applaud such heroic achievements under conditions of physical handicap, but we recognize also that freedom from disease and disability is a positive thing.” The meaning of what they are saying is unclear to us. One wonders if what they are saying is that these individuals did not age successfully because they were not free from profoundly affecting disease (freedom from disease is one of the three criteria of SA they propose) or if they did age successfully despite disease. However, it is clear from their definition of SA as having three defined characteristics that one cannot age successfully with the presence of disease. This, however, luckily, has not stopped other researchers from examining how one might be considered to age successfully with disease or with often marginalized social identities. Some work about these topics includes the possibility of the self-rating of aging successfully with human immunodeficiency virus (Moore et al., 2013); among older residents of assisted living facilities (Jang, Park, Dominguez, & Molinari, 2013); lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons (Van Wagenen, Driskell, & Bradford, 2013); persons with disabilities (Romo et al., 2013); and stroke (Donnellan, Hevey, Hickey, & O’Neill, 2012). Interestingly, several of these studies attempted to define and assess the nature of SA with reference to how research informants themselves defined SA, that is, whether they felt themselves to have aged successfully or not. This is a measure or a type of personal insight that is absent from the Rowe and Kahn approach to assessment. Surely, people themselves should have some ability to assess and understand just how well or poorly they are aging and which parts of the aging experience matter the most to them. For example, for some

the core of aging may not be work or productivity; it may be leisure (Hutchinson & Nimrod, 2012). Such determinations do not appear to have been considered by Rowe and Kahn, even though elements of their SA triad, such as “active engagement with life” are notoriously subjective. Some people prefer less engagement and some people prefer more, for a sense of well-being.

Rowe and Kahn (1998, p. 40) define active engagement in terms of two component criteria: “Many older people, for many reasons, do much less than they are capable of doing. Successful aging goes beyond potential; it involves activity, which we have labeled ‘engagement with life’. Active engagement with life takes many forms, but successful aging is most concerned with two – relationships with other people, and behavior that is productive. Not surprisingly, when asked their ‘secret’ to aging well, many of the ‘successful agers’ from the Mac Arthur Study echo the same refrain: ‘Just keep on going’. It is this forward-looking, active engagement with life and with other human beings that is so critical to growing old *well*.” Being productive is a significant component of the SA paradigm. It is important, we believe, to examine closely the Rowe and Kahn notion of productive behavior. For them, productive behavior is not necessarily economic behavior. It appears that there is no requirement that senior adults be paid for their labor to be considered productive. Rowe and Kahn note (1998, p. 47), “Most people, when they think of being productive, think about earning money. Older men and women who run households, care for family members and friends, or volunteer in churches and civic organizations often describe their occupations as ‘nothing’ or ‘just a housewife’ or ‘I’m retired’. These self-deprecating responses underestimate the value of what older people really do, and the importance of their contributions to society ... Our approach to successful aging corrects this bias; we count as productive all activities, paid or unpaid, that create goods or services of value.” One might argue that the disequilibrium in valuing these activities is not just with the older adults themselves but represents a dominant social position on the meaning and value of productivity in American society and culture. For example, one might not use the same argument about the value of such mundane activities for unemployed younger people who were looking for, but unable to find, work. The Rowe and Kahn approach includes an unidentified bias in this discussion that the older adults in question do not need to be paid in order to survive. However, the reality is that many older adults still require paid employment in order to survive in an increasingly unfriendly economic environment.

It is important to realize that Rowe and Kahn did provide some, although scant, policy direction for the behavioral changes necessary to promote the SA movement in their book. Chapter 12, pages 181–206, is entitled “Prescriptions

for an Aging Society” and discusses the possibility of increased productivity from older persons, methods of social accounting, the challenge of institutional change, barriers to change, and “Policies for the Future: Getting from Here to There” (this latter section runs from pages 199 to 203 and includes a discussion of learning from the Japanese example and a summary of what government can do to promote the elderly people.)

Starting in the 1970s, neoliberal policies have been responsible both in the United States and globally for the growth of a staggering number of poorly paid or noncompensated workers, for privatization of many functions at considerably lower wages, and for the diminution of protected rights for workers formerly held through labor unions and other collectivities. Rowe and Kahn are suggesting that older persons continue in their domestic and social roles as unpaid laborers who do things like “run households, care for family members and friends, or volunteer in churches and civic organizations.” However (and we agree), they are saying that these labors should count for something, as productive work, not the labor of small value that older persons are said to utter, modestly and self-deprecatingly, about the nature of their volunteer work. Rowe and Kahn note (1998, p. 35), “Although some are not able to work and some do not wish to work, there are millions of older men and women who are ready, willing and able to work.” An injustice lies not in the fact that older persons are not paid for many of the things they do that help others in society; it is found in the fact that their free labor has heretofore not been seen as productive by many. Yet, one must closely consider the potential meaning and effect of work that is productive but not paid. Because payment is so closely tied to notions of productivity both under neoliberalism and within American culture, and conversely low payment or nonpayment so closely tied to a sense of worthlessness or diminished status for humans, it is hard to see just how an accounting of forms of volunteer labor will be culturally transformed into having the same ontological status and meaning as paid labor. We do not find much to guide us about such a cultural transformation in the Rowe and Kahn book, just a brief chapter on Productivity in Old Age (pp. 167–180) that is quite varied in its content and usefulness and brief discussions of contributions of the elderly people (pp. 186–187), prospects for increased productivity among the elderly people (pp. 187–188) a discussion of “the work module” (p. 203), and a few assorted references. We believe there is a sense of hope embodied in the Rowe and Kahn thought that societal values about the meaning of paid labor will change without massive social and contextual transformation. Such a transformation, however, is made more difficult by the economic inequality related to the neoliberal paradigm.

Other Indicators for and the Dimensionality of “Successful Aging”

The Rowe and Kahn original three dimensions of SA have been refined by a number of researchers in the years since they were originally proposed. This facet of SA is difficult to discuss briefly. As we note at the beginning of this article, it is often difficult to know about whom Rowe and Kahn are speaking in their book: all older persons everywhere, American elders, Euro-American elders, or wealthy elders? Unfortunately, Rowe and Kahn never make clear the cultural assumptions of their work, as we noted earlier, and SA does not seem to apply in all ways to persons with fewer resources in later life. Other scholars have examined a range of cultural differences in assessing or even labeling the phenomenon of SA, and few of these authors discuss what happens or what can be expected by those who do not age successfully. Thus, research has defined a domain of “harmonious aging” among Asian populations while at the same time critiquing SA as ageist, rejecting of experiential qualities, capitalist, and consumerist, and based on Western cultural assumptions (Liang & Luo, 2012). Other approaches examine aspects of African-American SA and SA aging among Alaskan natives. Other populations that have been examined for special properties of SA include Latinos, Australians, Japanese-Americans, Romanians, and Chinese. We can conclude from this that cultural and social variation is not a topic that is well-treated in the Rowe and Kahn book and may reflect a bias toward Western possessive individualism as the default form of social ideology required to transform normal aging into SA. Such a point of view also reflects the interior ideology of neoliberalism, which seeks to flatten cultural and structural differences among populations by the application of a generic and powerful socioeconomic theory of cultural action, a form of “one size fits all” view of human life and development.

Besides cultural distinctiveness, the Rowe and Kahn approach has also seen development in a number of key areas of research since 1998. These areas include a focus on the self-rating or subjective aspects of what SA might look like; better definition of the multidimensional nature of the construct and the development of scaling of this construct; and the discovery and elaboration of other factors that should or might be included in local definitions of SA. First, several scholars have insisted that the perspectives of older informants themselves be included in the SA construct (Bowling, 2006; Romo et al., 2013; Swift & Tate, 2013; Tate, Swift, & Bayomi, 2013). Second, several researchers have elaborated the multidimensional nature of the SA construct since the original three elements described by Rowe and Kahn. The most successful of these is the two-factor model by Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, and Cartwright (2010), which incorporates both subjective and objective

criteria. There have also been four-factor models developed (Lee, Lan, & Yen, 2011). Others have suggested that SA can be viewed as on a continuum of functional independence and as a “continuum of achievement” (Lowry, Vallejo, & Studenski, 2012, p. 5). We note that for these models, there is little discussion of the social and cultural backdrop to explain how older individuals ended up as “successful agers.” Third, many researchers have identified other constructs that, in their view, should be included as a measure of SA. Among these are spirituality, self-respect, control, self-transcendence, resilience, and life satisfaction. Phelan, Anderson, LaCroix, and Larson (2004) found physical, functional, psychological, and social health dimensions of SA subjectively important to a large sample of older adults. Finally, Hodge, English, Giles, and Flicker (2013) found no evidence of a tie between social connectedness and SA. Interestingly, there is a small literature that includes some of the cherished concepts from gerontology as aspects of SA: life satisfaction, competence, morale, and well-being. For example, Ni Mhaolain and coworkers (2012, p. 316) note that “[l]ife satisfaction is a subjective expression of well-being and successful aging.” Indeed, it is often difficult to see how SA has brought us beyond these earlier constructs that already had been examined and explained to such a great degree. How SA is new and different from them has yet to be satisfactorily explained. Cosco, Prina, Perales, Stephen, and Brayne (2013) note, “Half a century after the inception of the term ‘successful aging’ ... a consensus definition has not emerged,” and they describe a set of 105 operational definitions of SA including 51 that use well-being constructs. They also note, “thirty-four definitions consisted of a single construct, 28 of two constructs, 27 of three constructs, 13 of four constructs and two of five constructs” (2013, p. 1).

Conclusion

We have attempted to show how aspects of the original SA paradigm are factually flawed, poorly articulated, or freighted with theoretical meaning that was implicit in the Rowe and Kahn book. In particular, we have shown how the development of neoliberal social theory and applications since the 1980s is represented in key aspects of the SA paradigm, particularly in its focus on (a) the individual as the key to social action; (b) its implicit creation of a class of unsuccessful agers, about whom there has been little discussion; and (c) a failure to provide any explanatory notion, other than individual action, of how SA might come about.

The goal of increasing the quality of life in later life has been the aim of modern gerontology since its inception. There have been numerous ways proposed of doing

so, often targeted to specific populations of older adults with particular needs. Although Rowe and Kahn had an enviable goal of bringing a more positive approach to later life, gerontology had already been doing this. Gerontology cannot speak to the improvement of life quality for older adults without taking into account and considering the problems, losses, and negatives events that many older adults experience. Further, many scholars have thought with great depth on how such needed changes might come about. Gerontologists have developed and explored a number of measures of positive life functioning well before the SA paradigm was introduced. We would conclude by noting, as others have done, that one good method of accounting for life lived successfully (and different from those articulated by Rowe and Kahn) may be the notion of generativity, defined simply as concern with the well-being of future generations (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986). The challenges that the newest generations of American older adults face, (e.g., economic change in the United States) may simply best be addressed by looking to the development of a better world for the future in whatever way this is possible and within whatever contexts older persons live.

To recall, Rowe and Kahn posed three questions about SA: "What does it mean to age successfully? What can each of us do to be successful at this most important life task? What changes in American society will enable more men and women to age successfully?" (1998, p. xi). In addressing these three questions, the jury is still out. However, it hardly seems that a focus primarily on individual action without attending to public policy and the creation of a class of unsuccessful agers may not be the direction we want to go in.

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