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# SUCCESSFUL AGEING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

A dissertation submitted in partial

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## Abstract

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The demographics and implications of the growth of the world's population of older people have been well publicised. Frequently, this is linked to concerns about growing demands for social services. In liberal western nations, this rise in the proportion of elderly people is occurring at a period in history when governments are attempting to contain state spending on health care and welfare. Within this context, the gerontological concept of 'successful ageing', which encourages productivity and self-reliance among older people, has emerged.

The term 'successful ageing' was coined by R. J. Havighurst in 1961 and developed by Rowe and Kahn into a gerontological concept in 1998. Rowe and Kahn's search to identify the factors "that conspire to put one octogenarian on cross-country skis and another in a wheelchair" led them to put forward the view that 'successfully aged' old people are those who remain healthy and socially engaged. The concept of successful aging is widely regarded as promoting well-being in old age. As a result, it has become highly influential in the fields of nursing, social work, and social care. However, the concept has also attracted criticism, mainly for praising the fortunate and privileged elders who have managed to prolong healthy middle age; whilst labelling unwell, disabled, and lonely old people as unsuccessful.

In this thesis, my central criticism of the concept of successful ageing is that its definition of 'success' in old age is not based on the views and real life experiences of older people, but instead, on the expertise of scientists and researchers, many of whom have yet to experience the decline and losses normally associated with old age. Consequently, there is a significant difference between the concept of successful ageing and a proportion of elderly people regarding the requirements for the best possible old age.

The purpose of this study is to discover the factors which a diverse group of old people regard as essential to optimal old age. It compares and contrasts their self-assessed components of well-being with the externally assessed components of 'successful ageing'. The process involved in-depth research with thirty elderly people in New Zealand and the United States. The majority were women. Several ethnic groups were represented. Participants included First Nations people, first generation immigrants, and the descendants of European settlers. Although it was not intentional, my entire sample consisted of people who would have been defined as unsuccessfully aged by the 'successful ageing' paradigm. Yet these people showed resilience, resourcefulness, and often, great satisfaction with their lives.

This research demonstrates that there is an incomplete fit between the factors, which older people say produce the best possible old age, and those promoted by the concept of successful ageing. It concludes that in order to promote optimum well-being among older people, it is necessary to take note of the experiences, views, and values of elders themselves.

**Dedication**

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**SUCCESSFUL AGEING: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS**

Jeanne Holmes

**To**

**Each of the Participants**

**and**

**In affectionate memory of:**

**Robert Gordon**

**Maisie Harrison**

**Allison Turner**

**Mabelle Armstrong**

**Fanny Gage**

**Annabelle Gregson**

**Agnes Schultz**

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