Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2020), **13**, 383–387
doi:10.1017/iop.2020.61

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

COMMENTARY

On the limits of agency for successful aging at work

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> "Both access to the means to success, however defined, and the very definition of success itself are matters of social inequality"—Katz & Calasanti (2015) on "successful aging"

Successful aging, in and outside of work, is an area worthy of research attention. To this end, Kooij et al. (2020) provide a process model of successful aging at work, detailing proactive and adaptive self-regulatory behaviors that support individuals' ability and motivation to continue working. We agree with many of their contentions, but some areas of the model require further consideration.

Such considerations all fall within one broader concern: that Kooij et al.'s (2020) model (and all models of "successful aging," to a degree) are overly agentic, overemphasizing the degree to which people possess the intrinsic capacity for control. Structural constraints and limitations directly influence appraisals, experiences, and self-regulatory processes, and individuals cannot "regulate away" or "through" all of these indefinitely and universally. In its current form, however, the model does not provide a direct pathway between the constraining forces of age-related discrimination and bias on the one hand and fit perceptions and self-regulation processes on the other hand. Such constraints and limitations are the primary focus of our commentary.

We recognize, of course, that including all possible constraints and opportunities in a single model is both unrealistic and unwieldy (and that Kooij and colleagues' model was focused on enabling or triggering factors for self-regulation). However, we would be unduly optimistic, and ruggedly individualistic, as a field to emphasize facilitating factors and not provide equal discussion of hindrances and challenges to successful aging. Without an understanding of what prevents or poses issues for aging successfully at work, we cannot get a full "picture" of aging, and of how to define "success" inclusively, for the diverse workforce.

Kooij et al.'s (2020) call for future research to "take into account that an intervention carried out at one level might have implications at other levels" and consider "that age-related bias and discrimination at different levels may hinder the enabling factors at the corresponding level and constrain their beneficial effects" (p. 345), sentiments that we echo and believe prompt elaboration in three core areas. Specifically, we contend that limiting and constraining factors manifest across the macro, meso, and micro levels of Kooij et al.'s model, and that these factors impact individuals' fit appraisals and self-regulatory processes. We discuss each of these areas by their level of origin, next (i.e., with the understanding that all of these factors have "cross-level" influences, e.g., systemic influences on individual fit perceptions).

It is worth noting at the outset that a disconnect between macro and meso factors and successful aging has long been suggested in the lifespan development literature (e.g., Baltes's 1997

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https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conceptualization of the "incomplete architecture of human ontogeny" offers that there are age-graded decreases in the efficiency of cultural factors and resources for supporting successful aging). The missing components from Kooij et al.'s (2020) model represent this disconnect and thereby represent a longstanding concern in the aging literature that bears addressing.

Macro level: systems of oppression and inequity

Systems of oppression and inequity constrain how, when, and to what end individuals self-regulate, as well as their perceptions of "fit." To the former point, motivation, goal processes (e.g., setting, striving, revision, (dis)engagement), and outcomes (e.g., rewards, performance appraisals) occur within an environment that is bounded by a multitude of identity-relevant societal structures, policies, and institutions (e.g., education, healthcare, criminal justice, social service, employment law). We agree that some of these structures can enable certain self-regulatory behaviors. Yet, at the same time that these systems enable and privilege some individuals and some processes, they also disenfranchise and marginalize others—whether through historical influence (e.g., the lasting impact of segregated housing policies and redlining in the U.S. throughout the 1900s) or contemporary discrimination (e.g., the recent rise in strict U.S. voter identification laws and subsequent vote suppression). Such forces, however distal, have bearing on work behaviors and career decisions.

Individuals do not just age at work; they age at work while embodying other identities (e.g., class, race, gender identity, sexual orientation, familial status) and contending with corresponding advantages (e.g., respect, status, social support, trust resulting from being a member of a perceived majority group) and challenges (e.g., avoidance, exclusion, incivility, stigmatization resulting from being a member of a perceived minority group). Research supports the role that factors such as socioeconomic status play in shaping motivation and behavior (e.g., proactivity), as well as opportunities (e.g., for goal setting, self-regulatory activities), feedback, and resources in organizations (e.g., for goal striving; see review in Pitesa & Pillutla, 2019). Similar research can be found considering other identities such as gender (e.g., Gascoigne et al., 2015), which is not even to begin tackling the idea of how such social identities overlap to produce interdependent and unique forms of discrimination and self-regulatory disadvantage (i.e., an intersectional approach; see Acker, 2006) or how privileges and disadvantages may accumulate over the life course. Even the supposition of self-reliance characteristic of lifespan and "successful aging" theories may be promoting disadvantage for certain groups, depending on cultural norms and values (e.g., those relevant to independence vs. interdependence; Stephens et al., 2017). Although we do not often dwell in the "macro realm," recognizing the substantive impact of these forces on psychological processes is imperative.

Much can be said about how systems of oppression and inequity impact individuals' fit perceptions as well. "Fit" with one's environment is multiply determined, which makes its definition, and its relationships with motivation and self-regulation, complex. Schmader and Sedikides (2018), for example, highlight cognitive, motivational, and interpersonal components of person–environment fit that jointly influence situation choice and behaviors. Their model considers fit broadly rather than in a workplace-specific form; however, their focus on how individuals seek environments in which they feel "safe" and authentic (i.e., with respect to identity and acceptance), and how this intersects with individuals' self-concept, goals, and relationships, is highly applicable to the work context. "Who" certain work environments are constructed by and for (e.g., "cultural defaults" or majority groups vs. marginalized or minority groups) can be signaled in a variety of ways (e.g., visible demographic composition, organizational policies and practices), and this macro element can shape perceived fit.

Privilege and discrimination filter down into how individuals perceive themselves and their jobs, workgroups, and organizations—all critical components of fit. They also provide context

https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.61 Published online by Cambridge University Press

for individuals to define "success" in aging as well as "proactive" and "adaptive" self-regulation—and the environments in which such forms of self-regulation are or are not possible. Thus, the "manageability" of perceived misfit, and how individuals act upon it, are bounded by systemic forces: oppression, discrimination, power, and privilege create unique personal environments and legacies that both enable and limit agency across time and life domains.

Meso level: other domains and contradictions

It is similarly important to bear in mind the influence of other life domains (i.e., aside from one's work organization, team, role) on fit appraisals and self-regulatory behaviors at work, as well as how these domains interact, sometimes opposingly, with work. The fact that individuals have nonwork lives, social circles, and roles and responsibilities is not a revelatory concept: the abundance of (and growth in) work–family and work–life research is a testament to this. However, the recognition that other domains influence self-regulation and fit perceptions at work is lagging behind in models of successful aging (cf. Hirschi et al., 2019; Thrasher et al., 2016). Employees live and work in multiperson systems (e.g., families, communities), and their decisions at and about work (e.g., to remain in vs. leave a job) rely on more than anticipated or experienced intradomain characteristics and (mis)fit. Not only may individuals' nonwork lives constrain the energy and resources they have at their disposal for certain forms of regulation (e.g., goal [dis] engagement, job crafting), but the needs and demands of one's nonwork life may also dictate decision making at work that, out of context, appears contrary to self-preservation (e.g., remaining in a stressful, unsatisfying job to maintain family health insurance coverage; e.g., Duffy et al., 2016). Self-focused decision making is often a luxury reserved for a fortunate few.

Moreover, these effects are likely interactive or multiplicative, such that certain social identities may result in heightened salience and potency for nonwork influences on work decision making: for example, living in poverty may translate into greater family demands (e.g., due to the unaffordability of child- and eldercare), leading to more reliance on and strain for "breadwinning" family members. The influence of control-based interventions (e.g., autonomy promotion) or work characteristics at various levels (e.g., job, workgroup, organization), as well as the nature of boundary-spanning resources, demands, and barriers, may differ substantially when taking such variables into account. An intervention that provides more freedom for employees may have the unintended consequence of blurring boundaries between work and family, resulting, for instance, in heightened strain for certain workers (e.g., women under more financial strain, when contacted frequently by family members during work hours; Badawy & Schieman, 2019). Here, again, agency, "fit," and "success" are necessarily defined by context.

Micro level: goal systems and contingencies

Restrictions on agency filter down to the "micro" level as well. Competing goals and intersectional identities combine to produce complex goal systems in which individuals appraise fit and self-regulate. Self-regulation requires the inhibition of alternative goals (both within and outside of a given domain) and the activation of certain prioritized goal(s). Moreover, goals are organized in hierarchies, wherein certain "lower" goals fall within a broader umbrella of striving toward a "higher" goal (e.g., reducing work hours may serve the larger goal of improved well-being). Just as domains can, in a sense, compete with (or enable) one another, an individual's goals can interfere with as well as facilitate each other. Agency may seem necessarily abundant here: how could context impinge upon all sorts of goal setting, prioritization, and decision making? Isn't some level of such behavior always manageable, barring extreme circumstances? The answer to this is "yes, but," taking into consideration the very same motivational systems that, theoretically, enable some level of adaptation and/or proactivity in any situation.

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First, we must consider that self-regulatory ability may fundamentally differ depending on an individual's life context. Poverty and stress, for example, are powerful forces that shape early development and regulatory resources into later life (Evans & Kim, 2013). Second, the perception of control itself, which is a necessary precondition for fit discrepancy "manageability" and the engagement of self-regulatory behaviors, may differ significantly for individuals from vulnerable populations (Thompson & Spacapan, 1991). The same can be said for how (and whether) individuals manage and optimize their goal systems (e.g., as a function of age and personality; Tomasik et al., 2017). Third and finally, if an individual must again and again disengage from unattainable goals (e.g., at the task or job level) to improve their perceived fit at work, there are likely to be broader, negative implications for that individual's higher order goals and/or self-concept (i.e., misfit between work experience and underlying needs, such as being a successful or productive member of society). Workplaces can create jobs and employment circumstances that facilitate goal engagement and self-concept reinforcement for older workers from diverse backgrounds. However, these interventions must be considered alongside the influences of systemic oppression and inequity, and of other life domains, discussed earlier. Individuals cannot "regulate away" or "through" all of these forces. In fact, these forces shape the way that individuals appraise fit and engage in self-regulation, and our models of successful aging at work must take such principles into account.

Conclusion

Models of successful aging assume that individuals are responsible for their own development. They largely focus on how individuals use self-regulatory behaviors to overcome limitations (e.g., as a function of age, life circumstances), rather than considering how limitations exist and shape processes of situation appraisal and self-regulation themselves—let alone how these forces (re)define "success" in aging. When we take such an individualistic and self-reliant approach, we inadvertently create an exclusionary version of "successful aging." Kooij et al. (2020) provide a clear model in which we can address these past shortcomings for future work. To do so is to truly embrace the principles of equifinality (i.e., many means and paths leading to the same outcome) and multifinality (i.e., the same means and paths leading to different outcomes) in our theories of aging, as we have purported to do for quite some time. We must move away from an over reliance on agency and bring an understanding of constraints, context, and intersectionality to the fore.

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Cite this article: Rauvola, R.S. and Rudolph, C.W. (2020). On the limits of agency for successful aging at work. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **13**, 383–387. https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2020.61

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