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COMMENTARY PAPER OF THE MONTH

Positive attitudes on aging: a life course view

Chosen as paper of the month in this issue of *International Psychogeriatrics*, Shenkin and colleagues (2014) tackle the complex but important issue of how older adults perceive the experience of aging and the life course factors that relate to these perceptions and attitudes. Taking advantage of data from a large, well-characterized group of healthy, community-living older persons in the United Kingdom (the Lothian Birth Cohort of 1963; Deary *et al.*, 2007), the authors conclude that in spite of common tendencies in the medical literature, the popular press, or cultural stereotypes to focus on negative aspects of aging, older persons themselves *generally report positive attitudes* toward aging. Taking a life course approach, the authors conclude that the most significant and pervasive correlates associated with positive attitudes of aging across three assessed domains (psychosocial loss, physical change, and psychological growth) are personality traits. In contrast, affective disturbances (depression/anxiety) are associated with more negative attitudes to aging. The authors also identify other potentially modifiable factors associated with attitudes to aging, including physical disability, social class, or living circumstances. The authors point out several limitations of this work, including the self-selected sample limiting generalizability; psychometric and conceptual drawbacks of the Attitudes on Aging Questionnaire; and variance not explained by *a priori* clinically focused predictor variables.

This paper represents a significant contribution to a growing literature that attempts to understand the relationship between attitudes to aging and life course factors. It serves as an excellent and much needed reminder that gone are (or should be) the days of viewing aging through a constricted "gloom and doom" lens – focusing only on loss, deficits, or negative consequences of an aging global society. To older adults the aging experience appears much more positive than suggested by cultural stereotypes and preconceptions. We in gerontology and geriatrics ought to continue to evolve our conceptual frameworks toward a more balanced view of the aging experience and begin to document positive aspects of aging in our research, and develop a better understanding of life course factors that contribute to the aging experience. This may promote healthy aging throughout the lifetime, combat ageism, and help identify intervention targets in specific populations. As noted by others (Levy, 2003; Quinn *et al.*, 2009), the effects of subjective evaluations and attitudes to aging on future health outcomes and engagement in preventive health behaviors are already well documented (Bryant *et al.*, 2012) – thus underscoring the potential positive impact of interventions that can impact attitudes. Finally, this paper lays out an important agenda for future work calling for investigations that longitudinally study life course predictors of attitudes to aging, focus on *how* life course factors lead to differences in aging attitudes (mediators), and assess similarities or differences in aging attitudes across racial and ethnic groups, geographic locales, or clinical versus non-clinical settings.

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