

Old Age As an Interdisciplinary Problem

A. V. Yurevich[#]

Institute of Psychology, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow, Russia

e-mail: av.yurevich@mail.ru

Received May 23, 2018

Abstract—This article is dedicated to social and psychological factors of aging, as well as to the psychological characteristics of old age. Note that old age is just starting to be understood as an age of significant reserves. The study of psychological mechanisms of aging is a new field, which requires close attention. The main conclusion reached by the author is that modern society needs a special ideology for old age, which would include economic, social, and psychological components.

Keywords: old age, aging, types, advanced age, psychological characteristics, loneliness, ideology of old age, psychological recommendations.

DOI: 10.1134/S101933161806014X

Since the end of the 20th century, interest in gerontological problems has noticeably increased due to demographic aging—the elongation of human life, an increase in the average age of people, and the growth of the share of the elderly in the population [1]. At the same time, humankind is only beginning to comprehend old age as an age that holds large reserves and possibilities. This tendency promotes studying old age as an important scientific problem, including a solution to a topical social objective—the provision of conditions for the elderly to live a full-fledged and socially useful life [2].

The period that embraces old age is understudied [3]. Studies of the psychological mechanisms of aging are only just beginning; at the same time, it offers opportunities to resolve or mitigate psychological problems of the elderly and help them adapt to it [4]. Considerable attention is paid to general problems of gerontology and geriatrics and little, to psychological aspects, in particular, to the emotional state of elderly people [5]. The division of psychology dealing with the psychology of the elderly requires much more attention [6].

Although there are about 200 theories of aging [2], there is no general theory of aging thus far [3]. For example, in the opinion of O.V. Krasnova, the numerous concepts of aging lack a concept that would be suitable for psychology because all of them are merely “microtheories” explaining not the process of aging as a whole but rather its individual aspects and levels. Although over a thousand articles dedicated to this topic are annually published in the West, this situation

persists. As for domestic science, the respective studies largely focus on the medical–biological and geriatric fields; Russian psychological science considers this topic in terms of clinical psychology and practice, while the social psychology of aging is in demand, as the sociopsychological component is clearly manifested in the main approaches [6]. Sociologists also complain that aging as a social phenomenon is rather neglected [7].

THE SOCIAL ASPECT OF AGING

Obviously, the health of society is determined, among other things, by the attitude to old age and the elderly, including both state social policy and everyday interaction [6]. Historians note that the aged played a noticeable role in stable, well-institutionalized societies (a bright example is the Soviet Union), while in transitional and conflict-torn societies the young always came to the fore [8].

In modern society, even in Japan, where traditional types of relations are very strong, respect for elders is declining [9]. This trend has been even more evident in the West and, since the early 1990s, in Russia. A cult of youth, *juvenilism*, has developed here, underlying the life philosophy of the 20th century [2]. The young feel little respect for the elderly; ageism, i.e., age discrimination is observed [10]. J. Kemper writes that in modern society, as the value of the young grows, old age depreciates almost to enforcing a taboo—it appears as a nightmare and turns into a disease [9]. Clearly negative images of old age and aging dominate. For example, according to M.R. Minigalieva’s data, only 30% of respondents assess old age positively, and only 10% characterize it as a period of active life, while

[#] RAS Corresponding Member Andrei Vladislavovich Yurevich is a Deputy Director of the RAS Institute of Psychology.

the rest assess it clearly negatively, some even rejecting the possibility of its occurrence personally for themselves, as if saying, "I will never be old, period" [3].

The authority of old age is falling [2]. The necessity to be young, healthy, and energetic is considered a moral obligation, while aging and illness are seen as a kind of wrongdoing. The propagation of such stereotypes in society places a heavy psychological strain on the elderly. Even in their families, they find increasingly little room for themselves compared to the previous forms of kinship [7], when the older generation used to play clearly defined roles in family life.

It is known that shortly before and after retirement both morbidity and mortality increase [9], social "uselessness" imputed to old people often becoming the cause of their depression and suicide [2]. It is noted that the main three events in the life of the elderly that weigh on their psychological status are retirement, which often leads to "resignation shock"; the death of a spouse; and relocation to an old people's home [11].

The perception of the elderly by themselves and those who surround them is often asymmetrical: while an old person thinks that he/she is unhurried, sober, careful, serious, and reserved, younger people, proceeding from the same qualities, view him or her as secretive, inert, sickly, sluggish, and conservative [9]. This attitude is also typical of the staff of medical and social services, who communicate with old people every day and perceive them rather negatively (quite explicitly), featuring them as disinterested, drowsy, and impassive [9]. A study of Russian social teachers has shown that 86% of workers of such establishments share the negative stereotypes of old age [2]. At the same time, a trend to later aging is observable [2], which is natural under a longer life expectancy and later retirement.

Studies on the effect of the social status of the elderly on their perception of their psychological qualities give interesting results. For example, in China, where old age is traditionally respected and esteemed, elderly people are convinced that their memory is better than that of the young [12].

TYPES OF AGING

There are two main images of aging, positive and negative, depending on how successfully a person adapts himself or herself to advanced age [2].

F. Giese identifies the following types of old people: (1) an old negativist, who denies any signs of old age in himself or herself; (2) an old extravert, who recognizes the onset of old age through external influence, for example, in the context of retirement; and (3) an old introvert, stung by aging and characterized by the loss of interest in his/her environment, inactivity, weakening emotions, and so on. Note that pure forms of these types are rare and are rather scientific abstractions [2].

I.S. Kon describes four psychologically strong types of old age: active, creative old age, associated with active participation in social life; active but mostly oriented toward providing for one's own life; oriented mostly toward the family (characteristic primarily of women); and focused on one's own health. As psychologically unfortunate, he identifies aggressive grumblers, peevish, critical, and disappointed in themselves and their life as lonely and sad losers [2].

Minigalieva distinguishes two main types of elderly people: focused on themselves and those helping their family [3]. D.B. Bromley describes four types of adaptation to old age: constructive, attitude dependent, defensive, and hostile [3]. There are also constructive, defensive, aggressive, and passive types of aging, which in reality combine with each other in different proportions [13].

In the opinion of G.S. Abramova, we can identify three types of elderly people. Representatives of the first type are not afraid of retirement because they have a favorite pastime. Representatives of the second type fear to abandon their work and seek to preserve their job as long as possible not only because they want to keep their remuneration but also because they are unwilling to change their lifestyle. Characteristic of the third one is "selfish stagnation," focusing on the past, as well as their health and physical sensations [2]. At the same time, a study conducted in the United States has demonstrated that 82% of men and 67% of women assess their retirement positively, associating it with leisure and the opportunity to spend more time with friends and family [14]. However, retirement can make one feel useless to society, futile, and meaningless for future life [5].

Empirical studies on the elderly make it possible to divide them into two categories: some feel the meaning of life fading away and seek to live a long and, when possible, healthy life; i.e., they make self-preservation their meaning of life; others try to broaden and enrich the meaning of life through caring for their children and setting socially significant goals [2].

PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAITS OF OLD PEOPLE

Many scholars stress that old age is largely reflected in human consciousness as a physical disorder or ailment. Ninety percent of the elderly see the main problem in the continuous deterioration of physical health and the inability to use their body to the full [14]. At the same time, according to some data, with age people tend to treat their health increasingly indifferently. Obviously, the clash of opinions on the part of old people concerning their disorders is explained by their different personality types. Another characteristic psychological symptom of old age is complaints of low mood. As a result, struggle against old age becomes the main occupation of elderly people [14]. Such a "struggle" is not necessarily reducible to care for one's

own health; it can be manifested in work and creative activity, plunging into which an elderly person becomes as if unconscious of aging or at least does not focus on this process, focuses more on caring for his or her children and grandchildren.

It is natural that the psyche of an elderly person reflects practically all his or her physical ailments, every somatic disorder being either directly or indirectly reflected in his or her experiences, including unconscious ones [5]. In his time, S. Freud noted that the unconscious rejects thoughts about aging and creates the illusion of everlasting youth. Kemper also writes that the unconscious does not age [9]; hence, elderly people often fail to accept their age, imagining themselves to be quite young.

Old age makes the past longer, the present shorter, and the future very limited and practically inaccessible, which often leads to a sharp decrease in activity and makes one waive plans for the future. Elderly people often seek to visit places where they spent their youth, but this inevitably leads to disappointment [8]. Presumably, escaping into recollections helps the elderly abandon thoughts about the future, which promises nothing but new physical suffering, feebleness, and inevitable death. The meaning of life narrows and fades, being reduced to the idea of survival and concerns about one's health [15]. In the opinion of L.I. Antsyferova, the structure of psychological time in old age changes sharply: the share of the future tense in the personality chronotope, which used to broaden the personality's living space, sharply decreases, narrowing this space, and the past begins to dominate in the living world of the person [11]. Empirical studies demonstrate that the temporal perspective of the elderly is characterized by the lack of active forward-looking optimism: "I want nothing, I have no prospects," "It will be worse," "It is better to try to keep what I have," etc. [1].

It is well known that the perception of age-related periods of human life changes at both individual and collective levels due to the increase in life expectancy: what was perceived as old age (let us recall the classical phrase, "The old man of forty slumped heavily into the armchair") is now maturity, if not youth, while old age has been postponed to much later years. However, the perception of age periods by their representatives themselves, on the one hand, and younger people, who probably have not undergone perceptive shifts, on the other, can be different, generating ageism [16] and other kinds of generation gaps. Of great importance in this context is the concept of subjective age, very popular in contemporary psychology.

S. de Beauvoir notes that the few passions that do not fade but, on the contrary, even strengthen with age are ambition and love for power [8]. We all know situations when an elderly person holds onto a senior position like grim death, unwilling to resign, which is a bright manifestation of these qualities.

Presumably, nostalgia, melancholy, and fear are the main characteristics of the psychological state of elderly people [2]. It has been noted that accentuated personality traits become observable in the elderly; all their traits become especially pronounced in old age [12], with the dominating opinion that inherent personality traits in old age become sharper and rougher and overall change to the negative: for example, positive properties such as economy, tenacity, and carefulness turn into greed, stubbornness, and cowardice, etc. [14, 17]. As a result, qualities such as irritability, grumpiness, sullenness, selfishness, greed, pedantry, excessive caution, and meanness come to the fore in elderly people. The content of the emotional sphere also changes, negative emotions, especially sadness, start to prevail [5].

Elderly people tend to adapt to a situation not by working out new forms of behavior after taking the requirements of the social environment into consideration but through searching for conditions that would maintain their already developed motivation, interests, habits, and experience [1]. In other words, elderly people do not adapt themselves to an environment but instead look for an environment that would suit them best.

Studies show that the stereotypical ideas about old age shared by the young imply negative traits: the excessively strong connection of the elderly to the past, their inability or unwillingness to change, their critical stand against the people surrounding them, and the urge to impose their viewpoint on others. Note that elderly people themselves interiorize these stereotypes [18], manifesting the logic of self-fulfilling predictions. Antsyferova also stresses the role of the interiorization of dominant social stereotypes in the development of psychological traits and lifestyle of the elderly [11].

Research studies demonstrate that the main needs of an elderly person are overall the same as in other age groups; however, the specificity of this period is a shift in these needs, a change in their hierarchy, which brings to the fore the need to avoid suffering [13]. A. Schopenhauer wrote that intelligent elderly people search for the absence of suffering and trouble rather than for pleasure and enjoyment [19]. Indirectly, this idea is confirmed by studies on the political attitudes of contemporary Russian elderly citizens: it is shown that they seek social order, social justice, social discipline, and responsibility and they are pronounced statistically [20].

At the same time, elderly people are often quite optimistic. According to the data of an American survey of 1980, more than half of the respondents over 60 years of age were full of optimism, nearly 30% were satisfied with their life, and only 20% were qualified as "sidelined," primarily due to loss of health. The survey showed that both the young and the elderly associated happiness and optimism with key factors such as good

health, material well-being, and good relations with their spouse [21]. According to the data of domestic sociologists, 45.5% of the elderly assess their emotional state as good; 32.7%, as tolerable or average; and 14.5%, as bad (the rest were undecided) [18].

The studies undertaken also show that love for life, which somewhat declines in the period between maturity and old age, rises again, reaching higher indicators in later years [14]. This perhaps explains the fact that very old people “hold onto life,” which is hard to understand for younger observers, and suicidal thoughts come to them less often than to those who are just at the threshold of old age, although common sense says that the situation should be the opposite. Interestingly, studies of American psychologists show that proneness to groundless, unsound optimism negatively affects the longevity of elderly people [15]. In other words, excessive optimism in old age is unfavorable; a balanced life stance is optimal. At the same time, contrary to the general trend, an excessive surge of sentiment up to hypomania is characteristic of some elderly people [5].

Research on the sexual life of the elderly, which, contrary to popular stereotypes, lasts up to a surprisingly long time in old age, also yields interesting results. For example, according to the American data, among fifty-seven–sixty-four-year olds, 73% have sex; among sixty-five–seventy-four-year olds, 53%; and among seventy-five–eighty-five-year olds, 26% [20]. One of the studies shows the growth of interest in esotericism in old age, interpreting this as the activation of the spiritual search on the part of the older age group [20].

Gender differences in the psychological state of elderly people have been noted. In particular, there are data that women take the loss of their spouse more easily and adapt better to life alone than men, and the psychological state of widows sometimes even improves. Overall, women are better adapted to old age than men [13]. It has been noted that many widows are so attached to their home that they prefer to live alone after their husband’s death [2], which is not the case for widowers. This is especially substantial since lonely elderly people are mostly women because of the differences in the average lifespan. Note that widows are socially and psychologically more like each other than widowers are. An interesting conclusion follows: marriage is more profitable for elderly men than for elderly women; this is why, elderly widowers seek a new marriage more often than widows [22].

Paradoxically, gerontologists have established that old people who live with their relatives and children complain about loneliness more often than those who live separately [14]. Note that an elderly person living separately does not mean solitude because they actively make new social ties and communicate with their children and acquaintances. It has empirically

been recorded that regular contact with friends and neighbors, characteristic of elderly people living by themselves, have a better effect on their psychological state than communication with relatives. Moreover, a significant part of the elderly who feel lonely are married but have little communication with their spouse because there is busy or the loss of the feeling of psychological closeness. Indicatively, teenagers often feel more lonely than elderly people living alone [22].

The popular phrase “happy old age” is not an empty metaphor: people can feel happy in the evening of their life. Phrases such as “successful old age” [2], “positive aging” [6], “productive aging” [11], “green old age” [14], “brisk old people” [20], etc., are also popular, and the types of the well-adapted elderly are diverse. The category of “new old people,” or “young old people” has also appeared: they are well adapted to modern life and are not satisfied with a place on the sidelines [11]. Elderly people often say that in old age they experience new joys and feelings that were absent in the past [14]. According to a survey conducted in the United States, 64 of 76 elderly respondents over 65 years of age view their life as happy, although this is perhaps due to a protective psychological mechanism. N.F. Shakhmatov is of the opinion that happy old age is more widespread than it is commonly believed and the negative image of old age in society is largely because the most painful forms of aging are usually in the limelight, while its trouble-free forms often fall off the radar. According to his data, the main psychological characteristic of people who assess their later years positively (they are quite numerous) is their focus on the present and not on the past and the absence of plans for the future; in other words, they live for the day, developing a calm, meditative, and sustainable stance on life [14].

THE IDEOLOGY OF OLD AGE

Special literature often uses phrases such as *optimal aging* and *optimization of the conditions of aging* [5]. This means the preparation of people for old age, implying the development of measures of its psychological support [1]. Perhaps the main objective of the “aestheticization” of old age is overcoming fears associated with both the present and the future [2]. In the opinion of Kemper, specialized courses on preparation for old age need to be organized to lift or at least mitigate many problems of the elderly [9], in particular, through constructing significant and long-term projects of life [15].

At present, it is increasingly often underlined that old age is associated not only with losses. People have the opportunity to live through this period actively, actualizing their interests and aptitudes that they could not satisfy in the past [6], for example, to engage in some creative activity, which is especially topical for those whose professional activity was of a routine

character. It is stressed that elderly people should have a positive attitude to their life, meaning not only the preservation of previous social connections but also their substitution for new ones [2].

The main problem of old age is often the necessity to answer a question on the meaning of life: “To live for what?”. For many elderly people this question is much more important than material problems [2]. Following Voltaire, Schopenhauer and other thinkers use the notion of *the spirit of age*: “He who has not the spirit of his age, has all the misery of it” [19].

There is an interesting proposal to formulate the specific aesthetics of old age as a counterbalance to the aesthetics of youth, actively advertised in modern society [23]. Concerning his newly published book eloquently entitled *From 70 to 100*, V.N. Ivanov writes, “I want my book to bring home to the reader that old age can be happy” [20, p. 82].

At the same time, most “recommendations” of scientists and other specialists for elderly people can be reduced to the idea that they should remain young as long as possible, which is unattainable in principle. The eloquent title of C. Orlock’s book *The End of Aging* [12] appears a tempting but unfeasible call. Most likely, we can conclude that modern society should elaborate a special *ideology of old age*, oriented toward later age that is irreducible to the aspiration to remain young. This ideology should include various aspects, the main ones being economic, social, and psychological.

The economic aspect is directly related to the socio-economic policy of a state and reflects not only the attitude of society to elderly people but also its economic possibilities. The paragons are countries, for example, Canada, where the average pension exceeds the average remuneration and many young people are eager to become pensioners. “Energetic old people” actively travelling all over the world are a characteristic feature of these countries.

The social aspect implies the creation of numerous nongovernmental organizations for the elderly, which are also typical of developed countries and constitute one of the pillars of their civil society. Ideally, such organizations should not only be political and of corresponding in scale to the state (like Russia’s Party of Pensioners) but should also be present in every apartment house or housing complex to allow retirees to participate in social and economic activity, for example, control over public utilities.

The psychological aspect includes two components: first, the attitude to elderly people on the part of society, this attitude being a key criterion of society’s humanism, and, second, the meaning-of-life position of the elderly themselves. This position is formed in the course of a person’s independent activity on the development and transformation of his or her life

meanings. Nonetheless, professional psychologists should also play a substantial role in this respect.

Obviously, to develop an ideology of old age, which must become an important objective in improving modern society, it is necessary to integrate efforts of representatives of various sciences, primarily economics, sociology, and psychology.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article was supported by the Russian Science Foundation, grant no. 14-18-03271.

REFERENCES

1. L. V. Borozdina and O. N. Molchanova, “Self-appraisal in old age,” in *Self-Appraisal in Different Age Group*, Ed. by A. K. Bolotova (OOO Proekt-F, Moscow, 2001), pp. 114–145 [in Russian].
2. *Reader in the Psychology of Old Age*, Ed. by D. Ya. Rai-gorodskii (Bakhrakh-M, Samara, 2004) [in Russian].
3. M. R. Minigalieva, “Problems and resources of elderly people,” *Otech. Zh. Sots. Raboty*, No. 3, 8–14 (2004).
4. T. D. Martsinkovskaya, “Characteristics of psychical development in old age,” *Psikhol. Zrelosti Stareniya*, No. 3, 13–17 (1999).
5. T. A. Nemchin, “Specific sociopsychological factors of the genesis of emotions and their manifestations in old age,” *Vestn. Leningr. Univ.*, Ser. 6., No. 4, 43–51 (1987).
6. O. V. Krasnova, *Psychology of Old Age and Aging* (Akademiy, Moscow, 2004) [in Russian].
7. V. Anurin, “Some problems of the sociology of old age,” in *Psychology of Old Age and Aging*, Ed. by O. V. Krasnova and A. G. Lidets (Academia, Moscow, 2003), pp. 87–91 [in Russian].
8. V. L. Kal’kova, “Beauvoir S. de. *La vieillesse*: Essai (Gallimard, Paris, 1970), in *Social Gerontology: Modern Studies* (INION RAN, Moscow, 1994), pp. 17–40 [in Russian].
9. J. Kemper, *Was heißt altern?* (Pfeiffer, München, 1989).
10. A. V. Yurevich, *Psychology of Social Phenomena* (Ins. Psikhol. RAN, Moscow, 2014) [in Russian].
11. L. I. Antsyferova, *Personality Development and Problems of Gerontopsychology* (Ins. Psikhol. RAN, Moscow, 2006) [in Russian].
12. C. Orlock, *The End of Aging: How Medical Science Is Changing Our Concept of Old Age* (Birch Lane, 1995).
13. K. Roshchak, *Candidate’s Dissertation in Psychology* (Moscow, 1991).
14. N. F. Shakhmatov, *Psychical Aging: Happy and Morbid* (Meditsina, Moscow, 1996) [in Russian].
15. M. V. Ermolaeva, *Development Psychology* (Mosk. Psikhol.-Sots. Ins., Moscow, 2003) [in Russian].

16. A. J. C. Guddy and S. T. Fiske, "Doddering but dear: Process, content and function in stereotyping of older persons," in *Ageism: Stereotyping and Prejudice against Older Persons*, Ed. by T. D. Nelson (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2004), pp. 3–26.
17. H. Thomaе, "Personality alteration forms," in *Reader in the Psychology of Old Age* (Bakhrakh-M, Samara, 2004) [in Russian].
18. I. V. Shapovalenko, *Age Psychology* (Gardariki, Moscow, 2005) [in Russian].
19. A. Schopenhauer, *The Wisdom of Life: Essays*, 3rd ed. (Swan Sonnenschein, London, 1891).
20. V. Ivanov, *From 70 to 100* (U Nikitskikh Vorot, Moscow, 2017) [in Russian].
21. N. Smelser, *Sociology* (Feniks, Moscow, 1994) [in Russian].
22. T. K. Bikson, L. A. Peplau, K. S. Rook, and J. D. Goodchilds, "Being old and living alone," in *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research, and Therapy* (John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1982), pp. 327–347.
23. G. S. Pryazhnikov and E. Yu. Pryazhnikova, *Psychology of Labor and Human Dignity* (Academia, Moscow, 2005) [in Russian].

Translated by B. Alekseev