

## Editorial

# Successful Aging 2.0: Resilience and Beyond

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Thirty years ago, the MacArthur model of successful aging, described by [John Rowe and Robert Kahn \(1987\)](#); see also [1997](#), [1998](#)) transformed the study of aging from a discipline focused on disease and decline to one emphasizing health and growth. Thousands of conceptual and empirical articles struggled to explain what successful aging is and how best to achieve it. Critics challenged the model for paying insufficient attention to the voices of older people, for being too narrow, for being too exclusive, and for stigmatizing those not aging well ([Martinson & Berridge, 2015](#)). Propelled by the global challenges of an aging society, the goal of empowering people to age successfully has motivated researchers and policy makers alike.

The Gerontological Society of America journals have been at the forefront of publishing work that challenges, extends, and moves forward models of successful aging. In 1997, *The Gerontologist* published one of Rowe and Kahn's earliest formulations of the successful aging perspective, and nearly 20 years later, the authors revisited and updated their model, publishing the essay "Successful Aging 2.0: Conceptual Expansions for the 21st Century" (2015) in *The Journals of Gerontology Series B: Psychological and Social Sciences*. This 2015 essay served as a springboard for the Call for Papers that have resulted in this special issue. These creative and methodologically diverse papers add to the rich literature about successful aging worldwide and suggest important implications for policy. They suggest new directions for research, while reminding us of the importance of the foundation established by Rowe and Kahn (see also the February 2015 issue of *The Gerontologist* for further expansions on the successful aging model).

The papers published in this special issue engage with two themes at the core of debates regarding successful aging: meanings and measurement of the concept, and the appropriateness of the successful aging framework

for understanding contexts of adversity and challenge. Regarding the former, papers by [Feng and Straughan \(2017\)](#), [Gu and colleagues \(2017\)](#), [Huijg and colleagues \(2017\)](#), [Jopp, Jung, Damarin, Mirpuri, and Spini \(2017\)](#), and [Pace and Grenier \(2017\)](#) urge us to think more deeply about the meaning of successful aging. At the heart of these papers is the struggle to define what successful aging is across a range of cultural and social contexts. The crux of this issue is whether successful aging should be defined and measured objectively as Rowe and Kahn suggest or whether it is best represented by the subjective appraisals that older people make of their lives. Earlier work suggests that successful aging has both objective and subjective components ([Pruchno, Wilson-Genderson, & Cartwright, 2010](#)), raising questions about how these dimensions of successful aging relate to one another. Papers by [Hicks and Siedleckim \(2017\)](#), [Kok, Aartsen, Deeg, and Huisman \(2017\)](#), and [Mejia, Ryan, Gonzalez, and Smith \(2017\)](#) identify pathways for achieving successful aging. They urge us to identify individual, sociocultural, and environmental characteristics, taking a life course perspective in order to understand how to promote successful aging. Findings from these studies help to identify pathways for interventions that will improve the lives of older people.

A second theme that emerged powerfully is the question of whether successful aging can occur in contexts of disadvantage and adversity. These papers reveal that older adults can indeed age successfully despite physical limitations and structural obstacles, raising provocative questions about whether and how successful aging is distinct from resilience ([Pruchno, Heid, & Wilson-Genderson, 2015](#)). The concept of resilience first gained attention in the 1970s, as it helped to explain why some children raised in highly aversive circumstances emerged as functional and capable individuals ([Garmezy, 1972](#); [Rutter, 1979](#); [Werner, Bierman, &](#)

Fresch, 1971). Three decades later, resilience again captured the attention of researchers and theorists studying trauma-exposed adults (Bonanno, Papa, & O'Neill, 2001; Bonanno et al., 2002; Ryff & Singer, 2002) as they sought to understand why some people recovered from serious accidents or life course adversities while others did not. Although gerontology has been slower to embrace the construct of resilience than related fields such as developmental psychology, core aspects of resilience play a prominent role in the Selection, Optimization, and Compensation (SOC) model proposed by Baltes and Carstensen (1996).

In this special issue, studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods show that people with early-onset (Molton & Yorkston, 2017) and later-life onset of physical disabilities (Tesch-Romer & Wahl, 2017), those using assistive devices (Freedman, Kasper, & Spillman, 2017) and individuals with diabetes (Chard et al., 2017) would not conform to the successful aging definition proposed by Rowe and Kahn. But, they can teach us volumes about resilience. Similarly, although some people exposed to unanticipated and potentially devastating stressors like a hurricane will experience setbacks from which they will not fully recover, others will heal and become stronger (Wilson-Genderson, Pruchno, & Heid, 2017).

Unlike successful aging which is an end state of its own, resilience focuses on how people respond to adversity. Although the successful aging model has been criticized for being within the reach of advantaged persons only, resilience is a goal that can be achieved by all. While successful aging is usually studied as a state, resilience is a process. Papers by Kail and Carr (2017) and Carpentieri, Elliot, Brett, and Deary (2017) show that resilience can be nurtured.

The successful aging model and the papers it has generated offer a roadmap for enhancing the well-being of older adults. In 2012, 562 million people worldwide (8.0% of the global population) were aged 65 and older; in 2015, the older population rose by 55 million (8.5%); and in the next 10 years there will be an increase of 236 million people aged 65 and older (He, Goodkind, & Kowal, 2016). From a policy perspective, it behooves us to learn more about how to promote both successful aging and resilience. We need to know, for example, who are the 5% (McLaughlin, Jette, & Connell, 2012) of older adults who meet Rowe and Kahn's definition of successful aging, and how did they get there? But we also need to know what makes people resilient to the unavoidable challenges of aging and how we can enable people to be resilient. The papers in this Special Issue have not only met Rowe and Kahn's "Successful Aging 2.0" charge, they have advanced our thinking about successful aging and resilience to new heights.

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