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"Real Possibilities" in the Age of Successful Aging:
An Exploratory Content Analysis of AARP Magazine's Feature Article

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Abstract:

The purpose of this exploratory, qualitative content analysis is to determine the manner and extent that successful aging is being represented in AARP Magazine's feature articles. The successful aging (SA) paradigm decouples aging from inevitable disease and decline (Rowe & Kahn, 1987, 1997). To be considered "aging successfully," one needs to meet the following criteria:

- Low probability of disease and disease-related disability
- High cognitive and physical functional capacity
- Active engagement with life

SA has been embraced across disciplines, and seen as instrumental in reshaping perceptions of aging. However, there is also substantial criticism of SA, with its potential to stigmatize and exclude large sections of the aging population due to its polarizing language and unrealistic criteria (Rubinstein & de Medeiros, 2015).

This study uses AARP Magazine's feature article, with its focus on celebrity, as the unit of analysis. The feature article format allows for the reader to live vicariously through these idealized figures and internalize the article's implicit and explicit values on aging (Marshall & Rahman, 2015). A hybrid inductive/deductive coding method is used to analyze the content in relation to successful aging criteria (Mayring, 2014).
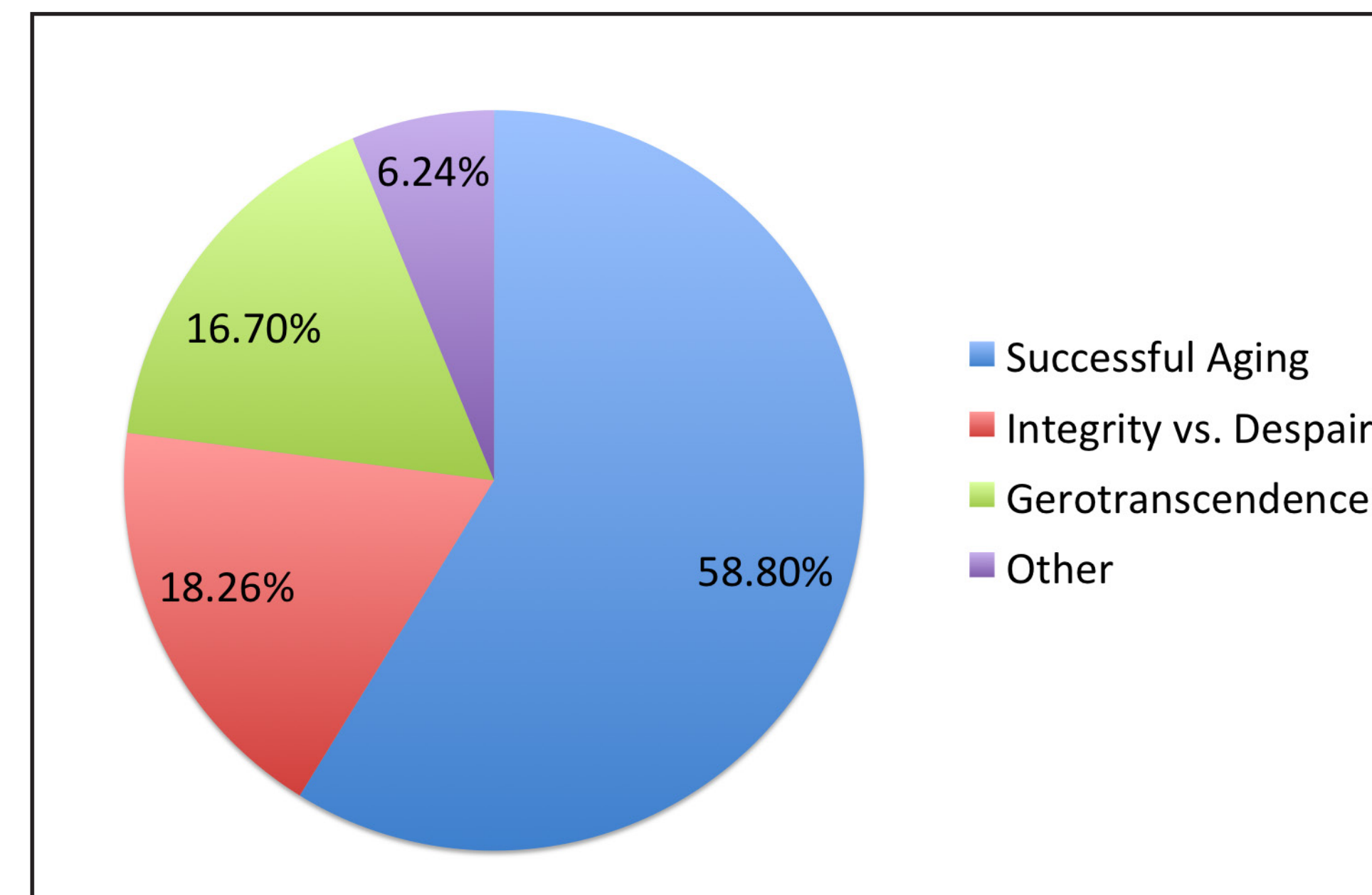
Introduction:

In January of 2008 the first baby boomer retired, heralding the beginning of a demographic sea change in the U.S. In 2010, 40.2 million (13%) Americans were already over the age of 65. By 2050 that number will top out at 88 million (20%; Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). Looking to the single largest driving force of policy and public perception of older individuals, AARP stands alone. Widely known for their member discount program and magazine, they also lobby Congress, fund scientific research, and device legislation through their policy institute. With a membership of over 37 million, and revenue of 1.5 billion dollars a year, AARP has more power to shape how old age is conceptualized in the U.S. than any other media source, yet there is almost no research analyzing representations of aging in AARP Magazine. This ability to shape perception of aging can have dramatic health repercussions. Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl (2002) found that individuals who had a negative self-perception of aging (SPA) died 7.6 years earlier than those who have a positive SPA. These findings take on greater significance in light of McLaughlin, Connell, Heeringa, Li, & Roberts's (2010) study, which found that only 11.9% of Americans over the age of 51 met SA criteria.

Research Question:

The specific goal of this exploratory research project is to determine:

- What successful aging themes arise in AARP Magazine's feature articles?
- Is successful aging represented at the exclusion of other aging paradigms, or do a multiplicity of aging perspectives exist within the sample of articles?

Hypothesis:

Due to SA's emphasis on sustained middle-adulthood lifestyles, and AARP Magazine's choice to feature idealized subjects, who by the nature of their celebrity embody SA values of activity, productivity, and independence, it is hypothesized that the SA themes of high cognitive and physical functional capacity and active engagement with life will be represented to the exclusion of other aging perspectives.

Figure 1. Percentage of Aging Perspectives Addressed in AARP Magazine's Feature Article.

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Methods:

- Exploratory, qualitative content analysis, utilizing a critical gerontology framework.
- Purposive sample of 18 issues (3 years) of the bi-monthly magazine between Dec 2013/Jan 2014 - Oct/Nov 2016.
- Data was copied electronically from the digital magazine and imported into NVivo qualitative data analysis software.
- Deductive category assignment was used to create themes based on SA criteria.
- Inductive category formation was used to code and clarify themes from the feature articles, through the process of:
    - Open, axial, and selective coding
    - Memoing
    - Concept mapping
- Inductive categories from the feature articles were applied to deductive SA categories, to determine the prevalence and manner of SA themes within the articles.
- Remaining inductive categories, which represented other aging perspectives, were assigned to other aging perspectives.

Preliminary Results:

Contrary to the initial hypothesis, successful aging only comprised 58.8% of the aging themes addressed in the feature articles. While this number is much lower than expected, it is still by far the largest single perspective represented (Fig. 1).

- **Successful Aging.** Physical activity, youthful behaviors, overcoming disease, productivity, and self-efficacy were the most dominant SA themes. Six celebrities interviewed discussed overcoming cancer or other diseases. All interviewees were in complete remission at time of interview, which reinforced the theme of personal control/self-efficacy.

- **Erikson's 8th stage of Integrity vs Despair.** The most prominent themes were wisdom, approval of aging, and addressing loss. The themes with the greatest incidence rates were mostly positive, however there were still a number of themes such as frustration, mourning, regret, and doubt, which represented the conflict inherent in this stage of development.

- **Gerotranscendence.** The most common themes within this category were changing priorities, continued growth, openness to the world, spirituality, and emotionality. While there is overlap with some themes from Integrity vs Despair, Gerotranscendence represents continued growth in new directions, rather than solely working to create meaning from one's past.

Discussion:

This exploratory research shows that while successful aging is not represented at the exclusion of other aging perspectives, it is still the largest focus of the AARP Magazine's feature articles. AARP, like many other organizations, is embracing the SA paradigm as an antidote to the ageism that has historically plagued representations of aging. While this embrace of SA, actuated through the profiling of wealthy actors and TV personalities, can help break down ageist stereotypes it also reinforces idealized versions of aging, which as McLaughlin et al.'s (2010) findings show are unattainable for most older Americans.

If AARP truly wants to present realistic portrayals of aging, which don't further stigmatize "unsuccessful" agers, they should focus on celebrities who are positively coping with disease and disability.