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**THE POSITIVE AGING NEWSLETTER**

**October/November/December 2019**

**Issue 111**

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The Positive Aging Newsletter by Mary and Kenneth Gergen  
Sponsored by the Taos Institute ([www.taosinstitute.net](http://www.taosinstitute.net))

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"THE BEST IN...INSIGHTS IN AGING"  
*Wall Street Journal*  
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**\*\*\*COMMENTARY\*\*\***

**\* An Invitation to Wishful Imagination**

With this issue of the Newsletter we enter a new decade, an ideal context for thinking about the future. Most often when focusing on the future, our attention centers on making plans. We might think about actions we need to take - a dental appointment, a house repair, travel arrangements, dinner with friends, and so on. We think of the practicalities, such as the dates, costs, obligations, and outcomes. There are other ways of thinking about the future than in the often stressful terms of problem-solving. We would like to invite an alternative, one that we call wishful imagination!

Wishful imagination is the kind that invites us to imagine desired futures — what we might wish could happen, experiences that would give us great fulfillment, world conditions that would please us the most, and so on. Realistic planning is obviously important, but it is limiting. We are constrained by previously set horizons of possibility. But in focusing on what is possible given the circumstances, we pay too little attention to our deepest hopes and yearnings.

Most importantly, wishful imagining plants the seeds of future realities. This is so in part because once we have played with a fantasy we become increasingly sensitive to how it might come about. If you let your fantasies carry you to a visit to the Antarctic, starting a rock band, or attending a World Cup match, for example, you will find yourself sensitive to relevant conversations or news. What started as a pleasant fantasy will slowly become a tentative plan...and possibly, next on the agenda of your life.

As we have previously discussed in this Newsletter, having a positive sense of direction in life can be a key to well-being and longevity. A wishful imagination can lend just such an optimistic dimension to daily life. And with the hope that wishful imagination may add to your life, we send along our best wishes for a nourishing and creative New Year.

▪ Mary and Ken Gergen

### **\*\*\*RESEARCH\*\*\***

#### **\*Friendship and Well-Being in the Information Age**

Much is written about the importance of friendship to well-being and longevity. Having close friends is closely associated with happiness and longer life. But what about friendship in the information age? Through the internet and cellphone applications people can instantaneously connect with the like-minded around the world, build networks, and form communities. Do these peripheral connections also count in terms of one's sense of well-being? And if they do contribute to life satisfaction, doesn't this have implications for our engagement in technology? After all, participation in various social networks is far greater among the young, and this is closely related to their greater consumption of "screen time."

To explore such issue, researchers analyzed data from two online surveys of a nationally representative sample of adults recruited through a variety of approaches (e.g., random digital dialing and address-based sampling). Study participants described the number of people from different social networks with whom they had "regular contact in the past six months." They could count friends, family, and neighbors as well as on-line acquaintances, coworkers, or service providers. Contact included face-to-face, by phone or email or on the internet. Participants also rated feelings of well-being over the prior 30 days. From these data, researchers distinguished between what they termed "close friends" and the range of other, more peripheral relationships.

The research first revealed, unsurprisingly, that older adults had smaller social networks than younger adults. However, the number of close friends was unrelated to age. Younger adults had large social networks consisting of mostly peripheral others, owing mainly to the impersonal connections made possible by technology.

The important question is whether these larger networks provide larger satisfaction. Is the older population missing out? The answer appears to be "no." Only the reported number of close friends was associated with social satisfaction and well-being. And this positive association did not vary with age. The well-being of younger adults also appears to depend on having close friends.

Valuing our close friends over the life-span is clearly important. However, this does not mean that one should just disregard the offerings of information technology. While an unlikely source of nourishing friendship, the internet is an open road to worlds beyond the imagination.

From: “Age Differences in Reported Social Networks and Well-Being,” by W. de Bruin, A. Parker, and J. Strough. *Psychology and Aging*, published online Nov. 7, 2019.

### **\* To Retire or not to Retire: Look at the Workplace**

Companies and organizations increasingly recognize the benefits of retaining older workers. Such workers are resources of wisdom. They carry the organization’s lessons of history, along with the values and commitment necessary for thriving. In many cases, there are no replacements available. At the same time, for older workers there is always the question of retirement. There is much to look forward to, but there are also many reasons for continuing to work. What factors tip the balance, so that some workers stay on the job and others decide they have had enough?

Although the personality and background of a worker may be important in making those decisions, some factors generally effect most people, regardless of their backgrounds. Stressful jobs, for example, have high job demands, but low job control. Short order cooks, for example, work in such an environment. Workers who do have control over various aspects of their jobs are usually more satisfied and healthier. Research lends strong support to these ideas.

In this study, thousands of older workers, were asked to evaluate their jobs for a Health and Retirement Study. The average age of participants was 60; The majority reported being in excellent or very good health. 78% were white; 16% were black. 57% were women. 34% were in professional or managerial positions; 37% were blue collar. Most important, what factors lead to decisions about retiring? As the research indicates, the quality of the workplace has a powerful impact on retirement decisions. Workers who feel they have fewer opportunities for advancement, less recognition for their work, little decision-making power, and scant job autonomy are less likely to continue working at older ages. Interestingly, workers who feel discriminated against, or locked into a job of drudgery also become less healthy over time. Poor health thus becomes a further reason to retire.

While these results are not surprising, they do supply companies and organizations with reason to look carefully at their policies and practices. If they do wish to retain knowledgeable workers, it is important to design jobs that provide adequate training, support, autonomy, and advancement. Whether one retires is largely a matter of whether the workplace a good place to spend one’s time. And this is a challenge for the employer.

From: Policy Levers May Improve Older Workers' Perceptions of their Psychosocial Work Environment by Lauren L. Schmitz, Courtney L. McClaney, Amanda Sonnega, & Margaret T. Hicken, *Generations*, Fall, 2019, 43, 78-85.

**\*\*\* IN THE NEWS \*\*\***

### **\* The Opening of a Positive Aging Research Center**

The official unveiling of the Positive Aging Research and Extension Center, at the National Pingtung University in Taiwan was held on Oct 30, 2019. The founder and chair of the center is Dr. Su-Fen Liu, an Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing and Distribution Management and an Associate of the Taos Institute. In attendance at the unveiling ceremony were two honorary advisors of the center: Drs. Kenneth and Mary Gergen, both founders of the Taos Institute and strong supporters of the new center. The center was established for the purpose of dealing with the social problems affecting the expanding population of the aging. Through research and extension activities, an emphasis will be placed on more positive views of aging and developing the capacities needed for thriving in a rapidly changing society. The Center will also provide courses to enhance these capacities, increase knowledge of health and nutrition, and reduce the occurrence of disease and illness.

The Center consists of three divisions, on human resource development, retirement planning, and educational extension. The Center's operations are funded from grants, and private businesses, groups, and institutions outside the university. The Center aims to draw from and contribute to international dialogue and practice relevant to positive aging. The website will allow users the option of browsing in both Chinese and English, and will create opportunities for exchange with scholars from different countries. A global sharing of knowledge and experience is a mission of the new center.

### **\* What's in a Name? Are You an Older Person?**

People over the age of 50 are beginning to challenge words used to describe them. Words once commonly used, such as "elderly," "geriatric," and "in their golden years," are now scorned as patronizing. Even durable terms like "aging" and "seniors," are becoming less acceptable. "Words like 'elderly' and 'senior,' with their negative associations, need to be put away," said Mike Festa, director of AARP Massachusetts, who believes many of the traditional labels suggest physical or

cognitive decline. “We’re avoiding those descriptions that convey the negative aspects of growing old.”

Such resistance— similar to previous quarrels over what to call women, people of color, or sexual minorities — is gaining momentum and causing many in government, business, and academia to rethink their language choices. For example, the American Medical Association is modifying its stylebook to eliminate offending words such as “aged,” “elders,” and “seniors.” The American Geriatrics Society and its scientific journals, have adopted the phrase, “older adults.” Many research and funding groups prefer “older people,” a phrase that better reflects their humanity.

For those who find the new labels uninspired, there are some fresh contenders. When she was writing her latest book, “This Chair Rocks,” author and activist Ashton Applewhite got tired of typing “older adults” and shortened it to “olders.” This was paired with another new word, “youngers,” and thus emphasized that age is a continuum. “People live in horror of being on the wrong side of the old-young divide,” said Applewhite. “We age in relation to others and society.”

As Jack Kupferman, president of the advocacy group Gray Panthers NYC points out, much of the discussion of labels recognizes that life spans are increasing, and older folks are healthier and more active than in the past. So it’s not surprising that many will reject labels that imply they are frail or incapable.

From: In a new age, nobody is getting old by Robert Weisman  
[http://epaper.bostonglobe.com/infinity/article\\_popover\\_share.aspx?guid=33596b09-ad08-4ad6-b9c1-78173faa4285](http://epaper.bostonglobe.com/infinity/article_popover_share.aspx?guid=33596b09-ad08-4ad6-b9c1-78173faa4285)

### \* **63 UP: Following the Kids to their 63<sup>rd</sup> Year**

This year is the 7<sup>th</sup> year since film director, Michael Apted, last brought forth a movie in his “Up” series. His latest edition called “63 Up” is now being shown in select theaters in the country. Friends recently saw it in New York City. For those who have never heard of this series, 56 years ago Apted was a member of a film crew that made a captivating movie on the lives of 7 children in the U.K. As it developed, every 7<sup>th</sup> year after that, he went back to these children, following them through adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and now to their 63<sup>rd</sup> year. An article on this film series was published in the *Sunday New York Times* magazine in December, 2019, and the reader response was overwhelmingly positive. As one reader said, “I doubt that many under the age of 50 are even aware this series exists or how deep and moving and irreplaceable... it is. Thank you for writing a heartfelt and thought provoking piece about one of the most beautiful

and long running movie projects of the 20th and 21 centuries. Surely something to be celebrated and discussed.”

To discover more about this project, you can find an interview with Apted, and a movie trailer on You Tube; online there are many places where one can learn more about Michael Apted, the film series and where the films can be seen. Those of you who are around 63 will find it especially moving.

### **\*\*\*BOOK REVIEW\*\*\***

*In Our Stories Lies Our Strength: Aging, Spirituality and Narrative*  
By William L. Randall. Available on Amazon.

William Randall is a well-known Canadian scholar who has specialized in the study of life narratives, and has written a book especially for those who are interested in promoting well-being in later life. In this book, Randall provides insights and pathways that enable us to use narratives to enrich the process of growing older. The book is not only for older people themselves, but for all those who are helping people to live more nourishing lives at all ages. Story telling is a way to discover hidden treasures of meaning for people of all ages. The book inspires reflection, spiritual sensitivity and connection to others.

### **\*\*\*ANNOUNCEMENTS\*\*\***

2020 Aging in American Conference  
March 24-27, 2020  
Atlanta, GA.

Special Topic: Examining the Needs of Today's Diverse Older Adults  
<https://www.asaging.org/aging-in-america>

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**\*\*\* INFORMATION FOR READERS\*\*\***

We hope that you enjoy The Positive Aging Newsletter.

- Questions & Feedback

If you have any questions, or material you'd like to share with other newsletter readers, please e-mail Mary Gergen at [gv4@psu.edu](mailto:gv4@psu.edu)

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