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“I want to be 100 years old, but I smoke too much”: Exploring the gap between positive aging goals and reported preparatory actions in different social circumstances



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ABSTRACT

Preparing for positive aging is shaped by the social context a person lives in. The present qualitative study explores and compares representations about preparatory actions in precarious workers (i.e., with temporary job contracts and insecure pension plans) and individuals with secure pension plans living in Germany. It also examines the discrepancy between what middle-aged persons think they should be doing in preparation and what they report doing for aging well. Findings from the analysis of the semi-structured interviews conducted here show that people who have insecure pension plans tend to see themselves as social networkers and optimists, while those with secure pension plans see themselves as social activists and careful planners of old age. All participants value an active, healthy body but manage to do little in order to attain it due to lacking time and discipline. In accordance with the socioemotional selectivity theory, perceiving a short-time perspective makes precarious individuals focus on emotional goals, while financially secure individuals value social goals. Implications for practice and policy change are discussed.

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And yet Lenny Abramov ... will live forever. The technology is almost here ... I just have to be good and have to believe in myself. I just have to stay off the trans fats ... I just have to drink plenty of green tea and alkalized water and submit my genome to the right people. (Shteyngart, 2010: 5)

Introduction

Lenny Abramov, the main character in the contemporary novel *Super Sad True Love Story* (Shteyngart, 2010) has it all figured out. At the age of 39 years, he has decided to live forever and is determined to do all humanly possible to achieve this goal. Like a true representative of the youth culture that

dominates modern society, he does not think about positive aging but imagines himself as forever young (Katz, 2000; Katz & Marshall, 2003). His decision raises the question, can his actions motivate preparation for a positive old age? Like the Lenny character, many individuals would like to delay old age, but less is known about their concrete actions and thoughts on preparation for old age. Previous literature has explored media portrayals of aging (Zimmermann & Grebe, 2014; Rozanova, 2010), beliefs on aging (Sellers, Bolender, & Crocker, 2010), attitudes toward old age (Abrams, Vaclair, & Swift, 2011), aging stereotypes (Levy, 2003), and views on aging (Wurm, Tesch-Römer, & Tomasik, 2007; Wurm, Tomasik, & Tesch-Römer, 2010). All of these inform on positive aging goals, but still little is known about how people choose the means to reach these. Despite an increasing body of evidence regarding processes related to successful or positive aging, highlighting the importance of selection, optimization, and compensation strategies (SOC, Baltes & Baltes, 1990; Freund & Baltes, 2002) or

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