The theory of gerotranscendence as applied to gerontological nursing – Part I

Barbro Wadensten PhD, RN
Senior Lecturer, Department of Caring Sciences and Sociology, University of Gävle, Gävle, Sweden, and Department of Public Health and Caring Sciences, Section of Caring Sciences, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

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Introduction

This article outlines the theory of gerotranscendence, which is a psychosocial theory of ageing developed by Lars Tornstam, a Swedish Sociology professor. It includes a description of the theory, its foundation and empirical base as well as comparisons with other psychosocial theories. The relevance of the theory to gerontological nursing is also discussed. The article is based on Tornstam’s (1989, 1992, 1994, 1996a,b, 1997a,b,c, 1999a,b, 2003, 2005) original works describing the theory.

Theories of ageing

Ageing theories can be divided into two main categories: biological theories (concerning what happens to the body during the ageing process) and psychosocial theories. Psychosocial theories of ageing attempt to explain human development and ageing in terms of individual changes in cognitive functions, behaviour, roles, relationships, coping ability and social changes. They cover different aspects of the ageing process, but only indirectly address crucial issues regarding attitudes towards care and the manner in which...
nursing care should be structured. However, it is important to understand that such theories influence nurses’ perceptions of ageing. Moreover, ageing theories could also be used more concretely to develop models of nursing care for older people.

Description of the theory of gerotranscendence

In the theory of gerotranscendence, Tornstam (1989, 1992, 1994, 1996a,b, 1997a,b,c, 1999a,b, 2003, 2005) has introduced a new understanding of ageing, stating that human development is a life-long process that continues into old age and that, when optimized, results in a new perspective. The theory of gerotranscendence focuses on two phenomena: the older person and the ageing process itself. The theory describes both the experience of growing old and the characteristics of a normal and positive old age. Further, the theory describes a normal and desirable ageing process and how this process may be rendered difficult or misunderstood due to the dominant values within a culture. Tornstam (1989) introduces a perspective that emphasizes change and development during the entire life span, including old age. In the theory, Tornstam describes not only the ageing process and that it is possible to attain wisdom, but also explains what it means to attain wisdom and the signs of gerotranscendence. Thus, he offers an idea of what positive old age may entail and attempts to describe a positive and natural form of life for older people.

The process towards gerotranscendence involves a development in which individuals gradually change their basic conceptions, resulting in a shift in their definition of reality from a materialistic and rational view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally accompanied by an increase in life satisfaction. It defines a reality somewhat different from the conventional ideas of ‘middle-age’ reality and lifestyle.

According to the theory, the individual develops towards gerotranscendence and may experience or demonstrate a series of changes. This involves processes by which the individual experiences a redefinition of self and of relationships with others, as well as a new understanding of fundamental existential issues. Tornstam states that the signs of gerotranscendence may be described as ontological changes on three dimensions: the cosmic dimension, the dimension of self and the dimension of social and personal relationships.

The cosmic dimension of transcendence

Tornstam explains that this refers to a vision in which the individual no longer considers him/herself particularly significant, but has a growing feeling of being part of a larger context, part of ‘the universe’. The fear of death is lessened, while there is an increasing feeling of affinity with former, present and coming generations. Gerotranscendence also includes a change in the perception of time, which is no longer as important as it once was. Moreover, the boundaries between past, present and future are erased, causing ‘then’ and ‘now’ to flow together. The mystery dimensions in life are accepted, and there is no longer a need to explain and understand everything. Even the sources of enjoyment in life change, to such an extent that ordinary everyday events become more important than grand ones.

The dimension of self or ego transcendence

The development of the self involves an understanding of the self along with transcendence. The individual is no longer so significant, but rather the total flow of life. This entails an experience of decreased self-centredness; it is possible to laugh with relief at oneself. A development of body transcendence occurs as well, whereby the individual is no longer obsessed by his/her body, but takes care of it nonetheless. Many thoughts return to childhood and childhood is revised and understood in a new way. This is followed by an understanding, on the part of the individual, of how different experiences throughout life have influenced and produced him/her as a person.
The dimension of social and personal relationships

The theory of gerotranscendence adopts a perspective that emphasizes change and development. It proposes that the individual becomes, for example, less self-occupied and at the same time more selective in his/her choice of social and other activities. Superficial contacts lose their importance and deep and close relations become more important instead. There is an increased need for solitude which contributes positively to development. As a consequence, the older person with a transcendent perspective prefers to spend more time on reflection and meditation and less on material things and superficial social relations. The spiritual world becomes more important than the material world. They have a greater need for reflection. Therefore, older people who withdraw from physical and social activities should not be regarded as disengaged or apathetic. Many enter an ‘emancipated innocence’, in which social rules and norms are no longer so important and in which older people allow themselves to be foolish and playful, which may result in a sense of freedom and chances to grow.

Thus, the process towards gerotranscendence, when optimized, ends in a new perspective, which is qualitatively different from those occurring earlier in life. Some of the signs of gerotranscendence were briefly introduced above. The dimensions and their components are also summarized in Table 1.

In the theory of gerotranscendence, it is suggested that human ageing, the very process of living into old age, is characterized by a general potential towards gerotranscendence. But not everyone will automatically reach a high degree of gerotranscendence. Rather it is a process that, at its very best, culminates in a new perspective. Therefore, we will find different degrees of gerotranscendence in older people, as well as older people who do not demonstrate any signs of gerotranscendence.

Like Jung (1967), Tornstam considers that the second period of life is qualitatively different from the first period, in which people’s focus is on the material plane and trying to understand the world. In the second half of life, the meaning of life is instead to get to know yourself and aspects of yourself that have been concealed or unexplored.

The process of gerotranscendence is a process generated by normal living and is a life-long process that continues into old age. Living implies, in other words, a process during which the degree of gerotranscendence increases, but the process can be obstructed or accelerated by various aspects of the culture and life experiences. For instance, the developmental process

Table 1 Signs of gerotranscendence

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<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Signs</th>
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<tr>
<td>The cosmic dimension</td>
<td>1. Time and space. Changes in the definition of time and space develop. For example, a transcendence of the borders between past and present occurs.</td>
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<td>2. Connection to earlier generations. Increasing attachment. A change from a link to a chain perspective ensues.</td>
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<td>4. Mystery in life. The mystery dimension of life is accepted.</td>
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<td>5. Subject of rejoicing. From grand events to subtle experiences; the joy of experiencing macro-cosmos in micro-cosmos materializes.</td>
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<td>8. Development of body transcendence. Care of the body continues, but the individual is not obsessed by it.</td>
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<td>10. Rediscovery of the child within. Return to and transfiguration of childhood.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11. Ego-integrity. The individual realizing that the pieces of life’s jigsaw puzzle form a wholeness.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The dimension of social and individual relations</td>
<td>12. Changed meaning and importance of relations. One becomes more selective and less interested in superficial relations, exhibiting an increasing need for solitude.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>13. Role-play. An understanding of the difference between self and role takes place, sometimes with an urge to abandon roles. A new comforting understanding of the necessity of roles in life often results.</td>
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<td>14. Emancipated innocence. The addition of innocence to maturity.</td>
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<td>16. Everyday wisdom. Reluctance to make simple duality categories of right from wrong is discerned and a preference for withholding judgements and advice is developed. Transcendence of the right-wrong duality ensues.</td>
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(Tornstam, 1996b).
towards gerotranscendence can be accelerated by a life crisis, if the individual totally restructures his/her meta-world. However, if the individual is not able to do this, the process may instead be obstructed. Aspects of the culture that can also facilitate or impede the process include society’s expectations of how older people should be and whether the culture admires effectiveness and rationalism. A focus on effectiveness and rationalism can impede the process. The caring climate can also obstruct or accelerate the developmental process towards gerotranscendence, depending on how staff treat and address the older person (Tornstam, 1996a).

Foundation and empirical base of the theory

Tornstam (1989, 1994, 2005) describes how the theory of gerotranscendence was born of the uncomfortable knowledge and insight that not only did much of the empirical data not support prevailing theories, but also certain theoretical attempts to understand growing older had been discarded in disdain. Tornstam also describes a feeling that something was lost when the theory of disengagement, described by Cumming and Henry (1961) was refuted. Although the disengagement theory and its counter-theories seem to be very different, they flourish in the same meta-theoretical framework (Tornstam, 1994, 2005). According to Tornstam, this framework is the common positivist one, in which the individual is regarded as an object directed by internal and external forces, and the researcher is mainly interested in the behaviour of the individual.

The first publication about gerotranscendence (1989) describes both the development of the theory and some sources of inspiration. Tornstam has based his theory on his own studies as well as on the theories and observations of others. Tornstam (1994) refers to Jung, Erikson, Gutman, Peck, Chinen, Chapman, Grotjahn, Holliday & Chandler, Kramer & Woodruff, Rosenmayr and Storr.

Thus, the theory is based on both the ideas and theories of others as well as on empirical studies. Three different quantitative studies have been performed, including a total of 4685 participants. These quantitative studies are detailed in Tornstam’s (2005) book on gerotranscendence. The studies include descriptions of gerotranscendence-related developments in life and of the different levels of gerotranscendence in individuals of various ages, up to very old age. A qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 50 people was performed and published in 1997 (Tornstam, 1997b). This study focussed mostly on people who recognize a gerotranscendental development in themselves, and contains rich descriptions of what it is like to be a gerotranscendent person and as to how it feels to develop towards gerotranscendence. However, the study also includes some individuals who show no development towards gerotranscendence, thereby offering a description of the opposite, a non-gerotranscendent individual.

Thus, development of the theory of gerotranscendence has been based on a critical analysis of prevailing values and assumptions within gerontological theories and research and on theory construction. Based on a critique of the prevalent research paradigm, Tornstam proposes a new gerontological paradigm, in which ageing implies something quite different from what it does in the other psychosocial theories of ageing.

Differences from other theories of ageing

Naturally, it is relevant to point out some differences between the theory of gerotranscendence and other theories of ageing. Some of the most discussed theories of ageing are: ‘the activity theory’, ‘the disengagement theory’, ‘continuity theory’ and ‘Erikson’s psychodynamic theory’.

The theory of gerotranscendence is different from other theories of ageing because it defines a reality somewhat different from the middle-age reality and lifestyle. Other theories of ageing are often based on the assumption that ‘successful ageing’ implies retaining the activities and ideals of middle age.

For example the activity theory (Havighurst, 1953) proclaims that an older person should continue a middle-aged lifestyle, denying the existence of old age as long as possible. This theory implies that there are no differences between middle-aged and old people, with the exception of biological and health-related factors.

Tornstam also argues that gerotranscendence is something new and different from the concept of disengagement (Cumming & Henry, 1961; Cumming, 1963) and the basis for the theory of gerotranscendence differs from the disengagement concept in several ways. ‘Disengagement’ implies only a turning inward. ‘Gerotranscendence’ implies a development which includes a new definition of reality. Disengagement connects with social withdrawal; gerotranscendence correlates positively with social activity, but also a greater need for ‘philosophizing’ is experienced. The social activities that are positively correlated with gerotranscendence are those in which more of the initiative for activity rests with the individual. The coping patterns of an individual with a high degree of gerotranscendence are composite; the individual takes an interest in self-chosen occupations and is not passive. From the disengagement view, an individual instead has a passive or defensive coping strategy. A high degree of gerotranscendence is also related to a higher degree of both life satisfaction and satisfaction with social activity,
at the same time as the degree of social activity becomes less essential for life satisfaction (Tornstam, 1996b).

The basic premise of the continuity theory (Havens, 1968; Atchley, 1989, 1999) is that, as individuals adapt to changes associated with the normal ageing process, they will attempt to rely on existing resources and comfortable coping strategies. The personality and basic patterns of behaviour are said to remain unchanged as the individual gets older.

The theory of gerotranscendence is based on the notion of a dynamic developmental process, just as is Erikson’s (1950, 1982) psychodynamic theory of human development, but it goes even further. Tornstam (1994, 1996) describes an important difference between Erikson’s eight-stage model and gerotranscendence. In Erikson’s theory, the individual is looking back at the life lived, but from within the same old paradigm. Gerotranscendence implies a looking forward and outward, with a new view of the self and the world. Erikson holds that, if an individual reaches the eighth stage in the development model, he/she will attain ego-integrity and wisdom. But Erikson is vague in describing what wisdom implies. Tornstam goes further and describes what it means to attain wisdom by specifying the signs of gerotranscendence. In an extended version of ‘The life cycle completed’, a ninth stage of old age and a chapter on gerotranscendence has been added (Erikson & Erikson, 1997).

In the Encyclopaedia of Gerontology (Schroots, 1996), the theory of gerotranscendence is described as interesting because it adds a new key concept of understanding to the developmental process of ageing and the transition into old age. Schroots also compares the theory of gerotranscendence, the disengagement theory and Erikson’s theory. This comparison points out some important differences. For example, gerotranscendence implies a redefinition of reality. Schroots also indicates that gerotranscendence is associated both with social activity and with a need for solitude, whereas disengagement is only associated with social withdrawal. Compared with Erikson’s concept of integrity, which refers to the integration of previous life elements, gerotranscendence implies new elements in the future, including a redefinition of reality.

Gamliel (2001) states that the theory of gerotranscendence offers a new paradigm both for the developmental shift into old age and for the situational shift in the daily life of an older person.

Staff members’ interpretations of signs of gerotranscendence

Studies in Sweden have reported on nursing staff members’ interpretations of signs of gerotranscendence and on their descriptions of how they have cared for older people showing such signs (Tornstam & Törnqvist, 2000; Wadensten & Carlsson, 2001). These studies showed that staff working with older people noticed signs of gerotranscendence, but their interpretations were highly variable; in several cases such signs were interpreted as ‘pathological’. Some signs were scarcely noticed by the staff and some were interpreted as common and in some cases as ‘normal’. These signs were labelled as ‘normal’ because they could be theoretically understood from either a common developmental or activity perspective.

Relevance of gerotranscendence and its application in nursing

In an analysis and critique of the theory of gerotranscendence, Hauge (1998) points out that the theory is interesting and extremely relevant for nursing because it offers a new understanding of living into old age. It can offer, therefore, new practical ideas to develop models of nursing care that are appropriate for older people.

Accordingly, the theory of gerotranscendence could provide new key concepts for understanding the developmental process of ageing and the transition into old age. With a theory that specifically describes the development and the meaning of development into old age, it is possible to begin to discuss how care of older people could be structured, and also how staff caring for older people could promote the process of ageing.

Guidelines have been derived (Wadensten & Carlsson, 2003) concerning how the theory can be used in practice and these will be introduced in Part II. The theory and guidelines have also been introduced in a nursing home and staff members’ adoption of these has been studied. This is accounted for in Part III.

References


Tornstam L. (2003) Gerotranscendence From Young Old Age to Old Old Age. Online publication from The Social Gerontology Group, Uppsala.