The Aging of Aquarius:

Gerotranscendence and Its Relevance to Post Modern Society

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Introduction
One of the fascinating dynamics of the ‘pig in the python’, or the aging of the Baby Boom cohorts in the United States, has been the well-documented influence these cohorts have had on social infrastructure (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #2). From the explosion of elementary schools in the 1950’s, to the rapid growth of university systems in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, the passage of these cohorts through the aging continuum has demanded social adaptations to accommodate their numbers. These cohorts have demanded changes within society on a much deeper level as well, including acceptance of social mores and attitudes that differed from those of previous cohorts.

One area that these cohorts have not yet influenced, however, is the development of the social aging theory. Social theories on aging have guided the development of gerontology for over four decades, and have resulted in social policies that have created the framework for supporting and directing aging roles and norms in modern western society. While few gerontologists would argue against the importance of social aging theory in the development of gerontology and aging policy, the active use of theory as a theoretical basis for ongoing research, and the ensuing development of policy, has stagnated since the mid 1980’s (Bengston, et. al, 1997).

At the same time that the use of aging theory has fallen out of favor in the field of gerontology, the need for new theories and new policies has intensified. One of the hallmarks of the Baby Boom cohorts has been their rejection of the truths and paradigms of previous generations. There is no reason to believe that the foundation of aging programs that exist today, most of which originated in the early 1960’s and were based upon the research that emerged from aging theories, will not be similarly rejected. Existing aging policies were not designed for the numbers of elders that will arrive with the maturing of the Baby Boom cohorts, nor do they adequately represent the values of the cohorts themselves.

In the current wasteland of new aging theories, there is one that holds the potential for continuing the important function that aging theories have provided. The Theory of Gerotranscendence, itself a derivative of Disengagement Theory, provides a social aging theory that diverges from existing paradigms and focuses upon an area of aging that is beginning to attract more interest and attention from research – spirituality and the search for meaning in advanced age. The divergent nature of the theory and its radical thesis of the importance of disengagement in a context of spiritual advancement and growth, provide a basis for acceptance by the Aquarius generation, the many cohorts of the Baby Boom.
In the following paper, Gerotranscendence, and its applicability as a theory on aging from which new research on subjects relevant to emerging cohorts can be based, will be critically examined. This examination will include several distinct components. First, a foundation of the value of social aging theory will be discussed, followed by an explanation of Gerotranscendence. Next, the relativity of Gerotranscendence will be discussed from a sociological perspective and in a post-modern context\(^1\). A third section will include suggestions for future research that could further prove, or disprove, the validity of Gerotranscendence as an aging theory, and thence as a potential contributor to aging policies and social programs. Finally, the primary concepts established in this paper will be summarized and reinforced.

### Aging Theory Explained

The study of aging from a scientific and sociological perspective is a fairly recent phenomenon. While sociologists have touched upon issues of importance to aging since the mid to latter nineteenth century, the focus of social scientists upon aging, its institutions and the forces that form role distinctions for the aged in society, has largely emerged over the past forty to fifty years. One of the primary catalysts for the development of social gerontology has been the formulation, and ensuing efforts to prove or disprove, social theories on aging. A social theory on aging is a thesis that explains a substantial element of aging in a social context. A social theory provides a lens that can be used to interpret the role of aging in society, both as a stratifier and as an equalizer, and it can illustrate the forces that move aging members of society in and out of various roles in a given social order.

While theories on aging are interesting and useful in describing and interpreting broad social patterns, their true value has been in providing the academic gerontological community with a basis from which research could be directed, either to prove or disprove the thesis presented by the theory. Through the use of the positivistic, or empirical paradigm of scientific research (Bengston, et. al., 1997), social theories were utilized in order to gather data that built upon a single foundation and moved in a largely linear, or progressive fashion. Social theories on aging have also drawn from an interpretive analytical perspective as well, which focuses less upon predicting and controlling research than it does upon observing and interpreting the meaning of emergent results (Bengston, et. al., 1997). Whether positivistic or interpretive research methodology is utilized, the fact remains that it has been the theses provided by social theories on aging that have generated the research and spurred social gerontology to amass a vast

\(^1\) For the purposes of this paper, the term post-modern is based upon two phenomena; social level economic transition and cultural changes as predicated by the transition of the Baby Boom cohorts to ‘senior’ status. Coincidentally, both phenomena are linked to the year 2012 as a watershed year. From an economic perspective, post-modernism is based upon the transition of society from a modern manufacturing and industrial economic base to a foundation based upon technology and the processing of information. From an aging perspective, post-modernism roughly parallels the period of ‘New Aging’ which began in the 1990’s but will also dominant after the first Baby Boom cohorts reach the age of 65, in 2012 (Torres-Gil, 1992).
amount of knowledge that has influenced aging in society from both the policy and popular cultural perspectives.

In order to clearly understand the use of social theories on aging as a scientific catalyst, it is important to understand the first theories that endeavored to explain aging in a multilinear, or comprehensive way. The first four theories, all of which emerged during the decade of the 1960's, include Disengagement, Modernization, Activity and Continuity. Both Disengagement and Modernization theories owe their origins to a structural or functionalist perspective, while Activity and Continuity stem from symbolic interactionism (Bengston, et. al., 1997). A brief synopsis of Critical Theory has also been provided, as it was the use of Critical Theory as applied to the study of Disengagement that led to the development of Gerotranscendence. Critical Theory originated from an intellectual basis in Hermeneutics (Bengston, et. al., 1997).

**Disengagement Theory**  
The aging theory of Disengagement was postulated and articulated in 1960 by Cummings and Henry (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4) and initiated the use of theories in social gerontology. Disengagement Theory focused primarily upon explaining the nature and importance of role exit for aging members of society, both in terms of importance to self and to society. From a labor force perspective, Disengagement Theory proposed that the withdrawal of aged members of society allowed for the rejuvenation of society's workforce, thus ensuring the continuation of new approaches, ideas and energies into the workplace. The same dynamic was proposed as applicable within the family unit as well, with aging members withdrawing to allow younger adults the opportunity to step into primary roles of leadership. Disengagement Theory proposed that this active withdrawal was essential in order to minimize the negative impacts of loss through death upon family and societal structures.

Disengagement Theory was far-reaching in its efforts to explain the necessity of role-exit to the stability of society. Equally far-reaching were the efforts made to discredit or debunk Disengagement Theory as a valid lens for viewing the social phenomenon of aging. Primary criticisms of the theory include clinical observations that were antithetical to the importance of role exit, an abundance of variability in the aging experience on the personal level and the viewpoint that the term 'disengagement' casts a judgment that the aging individual does not share, thus rendering it invalid (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4). Most important in the terms of this paper, however, is the criticism that Disengagement was viewed as an outgrowth of a specific period of US history (post World War II), in terms of its innate values and its representation of the economic needs of post-industrial society (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4).

**Modernization Theory**  
Perhaps the broadest of all social theories, Modernization Theory postulates that the “status of the aged in a community is inversely proportional to the degree of
modernization of the society” (Cowgill, 1972). Modernization points to the loss of status of the elderly, due in part to a decrease in reciprocity and the promise of inheritance that becomes prevalent as emerging generations rely more upon the opportunities of the modern economy and less upon the promise of inherited lands or wealth (O'Leary, 1993). This lost status then translates as a social equalizer across demographic concerns or socio-economic status. In addition, the lost status affects all aspects of the aging individual within society.

The far-reaching nature of Modernization, along with the difficulty in defining what modernization actually means, are two of the most advanced criticisms of the theory. While conceptually modernization may make a great deal of sense, it has proven difficult to narrow the thesis enough to provide a research basis in other than cross-sectional study. In addition, the dispute over defining modernization, or what constitutes status, has made measuring the validity of the theory problematic (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #3).

Activity Theory
Activity Theory was the first prominent social theory on aging that focused upon what was best for the individual within a bio-psycho-social framework. The basic premise for the theory is that elders are no different from younger adults in that they are happiest and healthiest when they remain actively engaged in productive roles within society (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4). For the purposes of explaining Activity Theory, a clear distinction is drawn between productive roles and paid roles in the labor force. In accordance with Activity Theory, volunteer, leisure and family roles, so long as they are non-isolating in nature, are all considered productive roles.

One of the primary supports for Activity Theory has been the accumulation of clinical research that links level of activity to lower prevalence of depression and greater cognitive function. Criticisms of Activity Theory are largely directed toward the use of the theory as synonymous with the notion of successful aging, and thus the marginalization of those elders who are unable to maintain activity levels that result in greater physical and mental health (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4). This limited criticism, however, only serves to illustrate how popular the theory has been and remains with clinicians and aging services professionals.

Continuity Theory
While considered a close relative to Activity Theory, Continuity Theory provides a few very important distinctions. First, for Continuity, the volume of activity is irrelevant to the ongoing health and satisfaction of the aging individual. Rather, it is the nature of the activity that matters. So long as the selected activity provides continuity with the person's life course, either through interest or career based continuity, then the satisfaction with the aging condition and the relative success of the aged individual in society remain positive. Continuity Theory provides the flexibility that ensures that marginalized elders, and those that suffer from
disabling conditions, can still achieve successful aging through simply decreasing the intensity of the continued activity (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4).

The emergence of Continuity Theory established a pattern that remained in the development of Aging theories throughout the late 1980's; the refinement of existing theories in order to increase the magnification of the sociological lens. In essence, new theories were established upon the basis of a portion of the previous theories. The search for the ultimate theory ended with Activity Theory. Instead, a combination of theories has been used to provide a variety of lenses for viewing specific aspects of aging in a social context (Bengston, et. al., 1997), and more importantly, to act as thesis for more narrowly defined research.

Critical Theory
Critical Theory draws from the work of social theorists operating from a variety of theaters and perspectives, most of which focus upon critically analyzing the process of power (Bengston, et. al., 1997). Critical Theory is credited to Marshal and Tindale with their release of the concept of Radical Gerontology in 1978 (Bengston, et. al., 1997). There are four primary goals to Critical Theory: To theorize the subjective dimensions of aging; to focus upon the practical, policy and program level applications of the theory; to link research and policy development / policy implementation professionals together with a focus on program development; and to generate new knowledge that furthers the freedoms of elders in society (Bengston, et. al., 1997).

Aging theories experienced an evolutionary process that began with wide, macro level constructions and ended with smaller, micro-level perspectives. Each of the five theories summarized influenced the development of Gerotranscendence as an aging theory, just as they have influenced the thoughts and explorations of gerontologists for nearly five decades.

The Theory of Gerotranscendence
Gerotranscendence as an aging theory first emerged in 1989, as proposed by its formulator, Dr. Lars Tornstam. The theory is most simply defined as “…the shift…from a materialistic and rational vision to a more cosmic and transcendent one, normally followed by an increase in life satisfaction” (Tornstam, 1992). Gerotranscendence is meta-theoretical, in that it crosses over several previously defined boundaries, binding the valid components of several models in a symbiotic relationship that more fully supports the life-long process of maturation (Tornstam, 1996). Tornstam sites the achievement of Gerotranscendence as synonymous with the attainment of wisdom in the Jungian process of individuation, and is comparable to the eighth stage of Erikson’s developmental model (Tornstam, 1989). An intrinsic element of the theory is that personal perceptions of reality change through the maturation process (Tornstam, 1999), and that achieving final transcendence in aging is simply the culmination of this process – a right of passage into a personally defined reality that owes nothing to
society even if the transcendent individual accepts some of the roles that society demands.

Tornstam credits the initiation of Gerotranscendence as a theory to a conversation with the Polish gerontologist, Jerzy Piotrowski, who had been an ardent opponent of Disengagement until he himself entered advanced old age and acknowledged the validity of the theory within the study of his personal reactions to aging (Tornstam, 1989). Gerotranscendence as a theory was born not from empirical study stemming from a platform of structural functionalism, but rather through subjective self-examination of a single gerontologist and the collection of anecdotal insights from a variety of aging services professionals and clinicians. These non-traditional insights led to a suspicion by Tornstam that the gerontological community had erred in discrediting all of the over-reaching theory of Disengagement, and thus lost those elements of the theory that were valid along with those that were proven to be inaccurate (Tornstam, 1999).

With the publication of his first paper proposing Gerotranscendence, Tornstam transitioned from a detractor of Disengagement, to a proponent of the theory’s potential, which according to Tornstam, had been ignored in the gerontological blitzkrieg that was bent on denuding the theory from its release. Tornstam compared the concepts proposed in Gerotranscendence as nothing less revolutionary in a modern social scientific tradition than the concept of Copernican heliocentrism was during the middle-ages (Tornstam, 1989).

Tornstam’s reformulation of Disengagement Theory drew from eastern philosophical traditions, as well as upon the Jungian concept of a common world consciousness, or collective unconscious. Tornstam asserted that disengagement from certain social roles was necessary in order to enable an aging individual to move into greater cosmic harmony. Only through active disengagement could an elder obtain the time needed for the process of reflection that ultimately resulted in a shift in perceptions of how the self interacted with the cosmos.

Fundamentally, Tornstam’s development of Gerotranscendence was derived from his efforts to apply Critical Theory against gerontology as a science and against Disengagement Theory specifically. Through this process, Tornstam determined that ‘conventional’ gerontology was bound within the positivist paradigm, thus containing the exploration and study of gerontological phenomena within the relatively tight parameters of issues of social problems.

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2 Cosmos is a term used by Tornstam throughout his writings and research. The term itself is significant in its abstract nature. Tornstam consistently chooses not to utilize language and concepts that mandate a universal reaction or understanding of Gerotranscendence in order to remain true to his belief that aging studies should be individually-based, and not incorporate a pre-existing values bias on the part of the researcher or gerontological professional. Tornstam’s fluid definition of Cosmos is most closely associated with the combined physical and spiritual universe, including spiritually perceived “flows of energy” and its connectivity to typical mystical-physical elements of water, air and earth (Tornstam, 1994).
(Bengston, et. al., 1997). Gerotranscendence clearly sets out to achieve the goals of Critical Theory through its focus upon the individualization of the aging process, the spiritual and metaphysical contexts of aging, its stated implications for policy, and its efforts to support the freedom of elders to seek out the final stages of the maturation process. Gerotranscendence provides a thesis that invites researchers to diverge from the mainstream approach to gerontology, and to develop the methods through which aging models can be individually defined.

Tornstam acknowledges that Gerotranscendence requires a shift from the positivist paradigm of sociological science to a greater reliance upon interpretive science. In fact, Tornstam levies the charge that this reliance upon positivism, coupled with an inherent values-bias of professionals involved in gerontological research, have created a definition of successful aging that is wholly reliant upon continuing the interests and values of middle age and inhibit the transition of mindset, attitude and spiritual references needed for achievement of Gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1996).

Research on Gerotranscendence
As implied by its name, Gerotranscendence is principally a theory of individual change. In a study of Swedish individuals aged 20-85, Tornstam was able to further define the changes experienced through Gerotranscendence (Tornstam, 1997). Tornstam grouped these identifiable changes into three categories: Changes to an individual’s relationship to the cosmos; changes to an individual’s image and association with self; and changes to an individual’s interactions with and perceptions of social relationships. Besides further defining the affected areas of ontological change, Tornstam’s study also provided quantitative evidence that individuals who had achieved a high degree of Gerotranscendence experienced a greater degree of life satisfaction and a higher degree of socially engaged activity (Tornstam, 1997). According to Tornstam’s research, this reformulated theory of Disengagement is actually a helper, or asset, in maintaining positive activity and engagement that is relevant to the aged adult, and not reliant upon promoting or sustaining the values of mid-life.

In a separate study, Tornstam diverges from the positivist paradigm in order to understand what value, if any, Gerotranscendence might have as a supplemental framework to providing formal care to the elderly, as well as to what degree the theory resonated with professional caregivers (Tornstam, 1996). The results indicated a large degree of resonance, with the majority of staff surveyed both comprehending the theory and asserting that it was helpful in perceiving certain clients in a ‘new light’, thus enabling them to provide higher quality care with a greater degree of confidence. The importance of this study is not necessarily found within its content, which is largely predictable. Rather, the effort that was made to abandon the controlled outcome experimentation of the positivist paradigm provides an example of the types of research methodology that can be used to take the study of aging directly to the practitioners of aging services, and
to expand gerontology into a meta-theoretical science with immediately practical implications, as well as a multi-disciplinary field of academic study.

While not specific to Gerotranscendence, a recent series of studies from Duke University have corroborated the need to focus on issues beyond the physical manifestations of aging. In a study of the death process, researchers noted that for the dying individual, spiritual issues ranked equally high with pain management as the highest priorities. In addition, the dying patient was focused upon giving to others, regardless of their own circumstances (Fischman, 2000). These indicators parallel the concepts that Tornstam has elucidated in Gerotranscendence. These concepts include a greater sense of communion with the cosmos and a redefining of priorities away from material and toward spiritual and interrelationship concerns. In addition, the findings also support Tornstam’s research that life crisis motivates a movement toward Gerotranscendence.

Additional relevant research has been conducted in the conceptual area of the search for meaning and connection to spirituality in later life. This research provides a variety of viewpoints on the issue of spiritual development among the elderly, and is important to the ongoing effort to promote Gerotranscendence as a viable aging theory with practical implications for aging adults.

The search for meaning has become the basis for at least one form of psycho-therapy which holds implications beyond the elderly population (Carlsen, 1988). At least one researcher has chosen to investigate non-western traditions for spiritual themes, or themes that support the spirituality of aging (Leder, 1999). Efforts to identify and explore the spirituality of aging have resulted in the establishment of programs at the community level to support the concept of “sage-ing”, or supporting spiritual transformation through aging (Leder, 1999). One such program, the Spiritual Eldering Institute, promotes exercises that support elders’ needs to “accept mortality and embrace joy regarding the positive aspects of later life” (Schacter-Shalomi and Miller, 1995).

While religiosity and spirituality are not always concurrent or synonymous, for a great many people they are inseparable concepts. In one research effort directed toward the relationship of religious practice and aging, religiosity was identified as important to most elders due to an elevated sense of well being, and to specific rewards from religious activity itself (Moberg, 1990). Another research effort identified the trend that elders that were active participants in religious activities exhibited greater self-efficacy and lower rates of depression, with black elders scoring significantly higher than whites (Quinn, et. al., 1996). While proponents of Activity Theory and Continuity Theory could certainly state that this study offers support to their validity, the same is true for Gerotranscendence. In fact, Gerotranscendence relies upon the meta-theoretical underpinning that there is truth and validity in each aging theory. The specific focus of the theory of Gerotranscendence is that the higher rates in self-efficacy and lower rates of depression coincide with an achievement of a greater degree of transcendence,
or a more advanced transition from material to spiritual priorities and perspectives.

Criticisms of Gerotranscendence
Though Gerotranscendence emerged as a radical and divergent social theory on aging, the timing of its release coincided with the disappearance of interest in noting any affiliation to, much less critiquing, new theoretical ideas (Bengston, 1997). In addition, the fact that the theory emphasizes the need to depart from the principal scientific paradigms utilized in modern sociological science, coupled with Tornstam’s assertions that modern Gerontological study has been contaminated with the values of the researchers themselves (Tornstam, 1999), have left the theory isolated, unchallenged and ignored by the research community. Throughout the 1990’s, research has maintained a primary focus upon health issues and their impact on attaining successful aging (as viewed through a lens of the bio-psycho-social model for aging and its inherent Activity / Continuity perspective). Simply put, Tornstam’s theory is simply too abstract, radical and confrontational to warrant attention in an era where research is driven by the search for the ultimate physical/psychological aging experience.

In criticism of Tornstam’s theory, a few fundamental barriers to acceptance are proposed. First, accepting the thesis of Gerotranscendence is uncomfortable for a scientific community that draws upon a western philosophical tradition, as it is so heavily dependent upon the eastern mystical traditions and is thus largely antithetical to the western scientific approach (Hauge, 1998). Alternative medicine has also been trapped for decades in this xenophobic scientific perspective, to the point of being disallowed under most managed care regulations. Second, Tornstam fails to clearly delineate the theory in other than descriptive language, parallels and metaphors. While Tornstam does define the basic concepts of Gerotranscendence, he purposely refuses to explain the theory in detailed language that would invoke a response from fellow researchers. In maintaining consistency with ensuring that he does not taint the theory with his own biases and values, Tornstam fails to provide enough of a conceptual framework for researchers to use as a formal platform for ongoing study. Finally, Tornstam’s assertions regarding the values-creep of researchers in directing the progress of Gerontology directly challenge the concepts that most researchers are comfortable with and have no vested interest in changing (Hauge, 1998).

In responding to Tornstam’s conceptual article, Quo Vadis, Moody states that Tornstam has “...underscored the need for a self critical spirit...” in gerontology, yet even Moody expresses a concern that the field would lack the intellectual resources to undertake such a journey (Moody, 1992). Moody also lauds the efforts of Tornstam to put a “human face” on gerontology through creating a framework for the individualization of research and study of aging as a personal experience. In fact, both of these challenges have gone largely unanswered. Tornstam’s thesis is too divergent and too open-ended to invite researchers to move forward to challenge it or to seek a greater understanding of its conceptual
framework. While this has remained true since the theory’s release in 1989, the time may be coming for this prevailing attitude to shift. Spirituality throughout western society has steadily moved away from mainstream concepts to a more personal and understated expression of spiritual communion. In addition, society has begun to open its collective mind to the opportunities of non-western medical traditions, including herbal treatments, the use of acupuncture and acupressure, and even the advancement of cranial therapies for the treatment of chronic pain. As this openness continues to expand to other areas of popular culture, the gateway to western research upon issues stemming from non-western philosophies will widen, inviting a closer look at theories and ideas that remain cloistered by the confines of western paradigm-driven thought and attitude.

Gerotranscendence In A Sociologic Context
As previously noted, Gerotranscendence as an aging theory is based upon an individualized focus – upon perceiving aging as having too many variables to codify into generalizations. This paradigm shift has undoubtedly provided one of the most solid barriers to the theory’s availability for research from other sectors of academia, or from other social gerontologists. Sociology is, after all, the study of groups and the forces that support order and role transition within those groups. The study of the individual is a separate discipline with very different paradigms in research and development. This disconnect between sociology and Gerotranscendence must be bridged in order to allow further examination of the theory, and to determine what validity it may hold for current and future cohorts engaged in the process of collective aging. In order to understand the sociological relevance of Gerotranscendence, the theory must be examined within the context of social structures and social phenomena.

Changes in Age-Norms In Postmodernism
One of the foundations of social structure is age-based norms and the social roles provided by people within those norms. The early aging theory of Disengagement, and therefore the roots of Gerotranscendence, relies heavily upon the importance of role transition, and role exit within an age-based social structure. The argument that Disengagement was based upon outdated values of a preceding historical era, stems largely from the use of mid-twentieth century age-norms as the basis for understanding the social functions fulfilled by elders transitioning through or exiting from roles after achieving a specific biological age.

The current transition from modern to post-modern society has begun to influence the accepted notions of age as a social criterion for establishing strict roles and norms. In fact, the traditional segregation of life-course stages based upon age, namely education, career and leisure, has already been destabilized. The concept of age stratification as proposed by Riley and Riley, has begun to change from an age-differentiated to age-integrated structure (Gerontology 530i, Lecture #4). This new openness regarding alternating personal patterns within a life course trajectory lead to fewer age-based norms, and a decrease in the
reliance upon age as structural component in social interaction. In other words, the roles that are required to maintain a stable post-modern society, become less anchored on age than on sufficient net resources fulfilling the roles at any given time. With fewer norms obligating elders to enter or leave life stages at a designated point in their own life course (Neugarten, 1980), the freedom to disengage also becomes less of a social dilemma and more of a personal decision. Within this context of reduced age-based expectations or stratifications, the concepts of disengagement to enable personal introspection become less threatening to the orderly transition of age-based roles.

The potential for disengaging and re-engaging within society lends itself to supporting Gerotranscendence as a phenomenon, but more importantly, it reinforces the theory’s relevance as a lubricant for multiple later life role transitions. The individual crisis that emerges from stress associated with role transitions (McPherson, 1983) can have society-level implications if experienced by sufficient numbers of individuals within a narrow timeframe. Gerotranscendence utilizes individual disengagement, frequently prompted by personal crisis as a coping method (Tornstam, 1997). The theory posits that the effects of Gerotranscendence include the capacity to enter and leave roles as needed with greater peace and acceptance (Tornstam, 1999). If true, this is worthy of further investigation as the combination of numbers of elderly within the Baby Boom cohorts coupled with the increased frequency of role transitions within an age-integrated society hold the potential for enormous social stress.

The advancing age of the Baby Boom cohorts, with their associated ‘pig-in-the-python’ dynamic, pose many threats to an aging services system that is designed and built upon the modern ideals of Activity and Continuity Theory. The policies and programs that currently exist are a reflection of a time that predated the aging of the cohorts making up the Baby Boom, and reflect the rejection of the need for disengagement. However, new social policies will be needed in order to support the aging of society without undermining national fiscal stability or advancing intergenerational conflict (Torres-Gil, 1992). Disengagement that leads to a positive reframing of social issues and personal changes is one factor that can support the emerging populations to successfully complete more frequent individual transitions without negatively impacting social stability.

Opportunities For Further Research On Gerotranscendence
One of the principal barriers to further illumination of Gerotranscendence is the fact that the theory does not easily accommodate the positivist paradigm. The study of an individual’s transition to greater cosmic awareness and connectivity, for example, has no readily identifiable markers that a researcher can numerically or objectively discern and analyze through controlled, empirical study. In fact, the methodology necessary for such study is the strenuous and expensive use of individual interviews and the laborious extrapolation and compiling of the resultant anecdotal, subjective and individualized responses.
Besides the expense and time intensity of such research, the results would be dubious in value to the current positivist-driven research community.

While this radical departure from positivism certainly poses challenges, it need not end the efforts of researchers to clarify or further understand the concepts of Gerotranscendence and its applicability to aging policy and programs. Future research on the theory should fall into three areas: Development of a new research model to accommodate interpretive and individualized aging studies; identification of markers for achieving Gerotranscendence in order to provide a basis of credibility for the theory through the accumulation of objective data concerning individual progress toward a transcendent state; and research directed at objectifying the eastern philosophical and mystical tradition so that western researchers can adapt to these non-traditional themes and begin to merge the benefits of western science with the challenges presented by non-western thought.

**Conclusion**

Over the past two decades, western industrialized society has been shifting dramatically from a modern society, with an economic basis on industry and manufacturing, to a post-modern society based upon an information-oriented economy with reliance upon technology, as opposed to manufacturing. Economic futurists predict that this transition for modern to post-modern economies will be completed in 2012, roughly the same time that the Baby Boom cohorts begin to become eligible for Social Security and other income transfers.

Current aging policies and programs are based upon the research that has in turn directed aging policies from a distinct social period, and were appropriate for that historical time frame. Already, society is beginning to grapple with the structural lag (Riley, 1990) that is a result of aging cohorts outpacing society’s ability to create social systems to support them. Fiscal conservancy and the aging of society are at odds. The intersection of continuing to provide programs that were designed within the context of the theories and research of the early 1960’s against the emergent social mores and economic realities of the post modern era has been described as having potentially apocalyptic side-effects in terms of social stability. This clash of policy and program paradigms with changing social and economic realities provides a fertile ground for the rejuvenated study of gerontological theory.

Clearly, there are issues of aging in the post-modern era that present challenges to elders, families and society as a whole. A society cannot undergo the fundamental transition from a modern manufacturing base to a post-modern, technology base without demanding adaptation of roles from the cohorts that make up the membership of that society, or the institutions that support them. For the past decade, society has continued to undergo this transition to the post-modern era, and allow the role transitions to occur as well, without changing the lens that is used to identify social needs. Failure to transition academic research,
and ensuing policy alterations, will result in stagnating policies and an unnecessary prolonging of a period of structural lag (Riley, 1990).

In the current social context of dramatic change and adaptation, Gerotranscendence provides a meaningful and relative lens that leads to an understanding of elders, not as a building block of society’s core institutions, but rather as individuals with differing perspectives and objectives than the predominate, youth oriented society may espouse. Gerotranscendence provides a framework through which elders can be supported to actively engage, disengage or re-engage into socially expected roles, relationships and norms as dictated by events that occur during the life course. Jung stated, “All true things must change and only that which changes remains true” (Rosenthal, 1999). Gerotranscendence provides a theory that is based upon this concept of change.

During the early 1960’s, reliance upon past social values was used as a banner in the charge to defeat the concepts of Disengagement. In another piece of evidence for the cyclical nature of history, that same charge may soon be levied against the theories that have led researchers away from the study of individualized aging processes, and toward the confinement and compartmentalization of gerontology within the brackets of ‘successful aging’, as guided by the values of theories that emerged four decades in the past.

As a meta-theory, Gerotranscendence does not propose one answer to all situations. Supporting the study of Gerotranscendence, and its potential for facilitating the aging process at a macro-societal level, does not mean that one abandons the knowledge gained to date. Gerotranscendence does not invalidate Activity, Continuity or any other theory. Instead, Gerotranscendence attempts to draw from other theories to pull those elements that are viable and provide a policy foundation that is based upon that validity. Gerotranscendence emerged from an era of micro-theorization and does not seek to provide the framework for all aging issues. The potential for the theory at a policy level lies in joining the need for elders to remain engaged in activities that have meaning for them as individuals with the need to legitimatize solitary pursuits such as reminiscence and introspection, activities often associated with unhealthy disengagement.

The ‘pig in the python’ has forced social change in every area of society that it has contacted as it moves along the aging continuum. Demographically, the systems, policies and theories of aging will be the next to undergo alteration to meet the needs of the Aquarius Generation. Gerotranscendence provides a viable framework that is directed toward the study of aging on an individualized and introspective basis that accommodates the attitudes and values of the Baby Boom cohorts. The theory itself is relevant to the maturation of a post-modern society. Whether or not it can bypass the roadblocks presented by the demands it makes upon researchers to abandon existing paradigms, and the challenges it asserts in regards to self-critical thinking, remain to be seen.
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