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Limitations on the Importance of Self-Regulation in Old Age

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Freund, Nikitin, and Ritter (this issue) have written an intriguing article on the challenges and opportunities that arise from historical increases in life expectancy for psychological functioning. The authors convincingly argue that the relative lack of social norms and expectations for the years gained in life constitute a major challenge for the self-regulatory system. More specifically, an extended lifetime perspective and the normative deregulation of old age allow, and at the same time require, people to set, pursue, and disengage from personal goals in a relatively self-structured and self-directed manner. The empirical evidence reviewed supports their proposal in three key domains of adult life: Social relations, leisure, and work. We would like to applaud the authors for this thought-provoking article that covers a lot of ground in illustrating the role of self-regulation for aging successfully.

Our intent in this commentary is to build upon and extend some of the arguments that were mentioned in the target article, but were not the major focus there. Our comments raise three issues intertwined around the limits of self-regulation. Specifically, drawing on some of the tenets of lifespan psychology (Baltes, 1987) we highlight (1) potential constraints on self-regulation imposed by broad-based dysfunction that occurs in very old age, (2) that age-related changes in the health and cognitive domains may limit self-regulatory potential, and (3) the potential consequences of the increasing importance of self-regulation on heterogeneity and differential aging. We fully agree with the perspective of considering self-regulation as the “leading edge of positive aging”, but we would like to complement and, in part, qualify the picture drawn by Freund and colleagues.

Limitations and Constraints of Self-Regulation in Very Old Age

The target article focuses primarily on the promises and challenges of the self-regulatory system to make up for the relative lack of societal norms in the portion of the life span following retirement – old age or the so-called *Third Age* (Baltes, 1997; Laslett, 1991). This post-retirement phase of life, though, leads to the *Fourth Age*, a final chapter of life that is characterized by broad-based dysfunctionality (Suzman, Manton, & Willis, 1992). Positive aging may well be possible and particularly profit from self-regulatory efforts in old age. However, the vulnerability, unpredictability, and bio-cultural constraints that appear in very old age will make self-regulation increasingly difficult (Baltes & Smith, 2003). As noted by the authors, the potential for growth will become substantially reduced with increasing age. As the ratio of gains to losses becomes more and more negative, and personal resources

become increasingly scarce, individuals will shift towards the maintenance and regulation of loss (Baltes, 1997; Dixon & Bäckman, 1995). Thus, in the long run, self-regulation resources will not be focused on the achievement of new goals, but will be used to manage losses.

To illustrate the limitations imposed by the Fourth Age, we highlight empirical findings showing that individuals who survive into very old age are at the limits of their adaptive capacity (Baltes & Smith, 2003). For example, investigations of terminal decline suggest steep and rapid declines in cognitive function during the last few years of life (e.g., Sliwinski et al., 2006; Wilson et al., 2003; for an overview, see Bäckman & MacDonald, 2006). Even well-being, a variable that could be taken as a self-evaluative indicator of general capacity, appears to decline quite rapidly as individuals approach death, particularly so among people dying after the age of 85 (Gerstorf, Ram, Röcke, Lindenberger, & Smith, 2008; Gerstorf, Ram, Estabrook, Schupp, Wagner, & Lindenberger, 2008). More specifically, individuals in the Fourth Age prototypically exhibit precipitous decline (e.g., roughly a full standard deviation in the last four years of life). Interpreted within the context of the current discussion, the evidence for terminal decline suggests that, even though individuals have the self-regulatory resources needed for successfully mastering the Third Age, the transition to the Fourth Age, will bring a sharp end to the possibilities afforded by increased self-regulation. This is certainly an extreme case, but it illustrates the more general point that the potential benefits of self-regulation appears to be considerably constrained as people become very old.

Limitations and Constraints Imposed by the Health and Cognitive Domains

Social relations, leisure, and work are highly important and dominating domains of life across adulthood and old age. The examples provided in the target article nicely illustrate that self-regulation is of increasing importance in these areas. In an attempt to broaden the perspective, we draw on two basic tenets of lifespan psychology about the plasticity and multidirectionality of ontogenetic development (Baltes, 1987; see also Rowe & Kahn, 1997; Ryff & Singer, 1998). Do and how do the general patterns described for the above domains generalize to other crucial life domains? Differential constraints and plasticity lead to considerable diversity and pluralism in the direction of developmental change both between and within functional domains (Baltes, Staudinger, & Lindenberger, 2006; Lerner, 1984; Magnusson, 1988). In short, some domains may “age” earlier or more quickly than others. For example, it is well-known that age-normative cumulative declines in several cognitive abilities commence in early adulthood (e.g., perceptual speed: Salthouse, 2004). Even the relatively age-insensitive crystallized aspects of intelligence typically decline beyond age 75 or age 80 (Ghisletta & Lindenberger, 2003). Similarly, a variety of health aspects show very strong age-related decrements, including increasing risks for lower-body dysfunctions and moderate to severe physical illnesses (Guralnik et al., 1993). In sum, it appears that at least some aspects of mental and physical function are already declining in the Third Age.

If these decrements impose any domain-generalized constraints, they may impede the possibilities and the efficacy of self-regulation for positive development – already in the Third Age. Current research on how the multiple domains of functioning develop together, interrelate, as well as affect and are affected by one another suggest that aging is a complex, multidimensional phenomena. For example, the onset of physical disability portends increases in depression (e.g., lower well-being which can be interpreted as an indicator of constrained self-regulation; Ormel et al., 1997). As well, increases in depression appear to hasten the onset of disability (Bruce et al., 1994; see also Verbrugge & Jette, 1994). Similarly, multiple domains, such as cognition and well-being, appear to change together, with one leading changes in the other or/and vice versa (for discussion, see Gerstorf,

Lövden, Röcke, Smith, & Lindenberger, 2007). Our point is that self-regulation is embedded in other domains of functioning, which might act as a precursor or a consequence to self-regulation, and age-related changes in cognition and health will likely constrain individuals' ability to effectively use their self-regulatory capacities effectively and efficiently.

In addition to the possible age-graded limitations exposed by other functional domains, it is also important to consider the normative developmental trajectory of self-regulatory capacity itself. As the authors highlight, self-regulation skills increase with successful long-term use (Muraven, 1999). The progression of life sketched in the target article, however, is one filled with strong external regulation across adulthood (e.g., social norms and expectations) -constraints that provide little opportunity in early and middle adulthood for use and practice of these skills. As a consequence, self-regulation capacity across adulthood is, for the most part, dormant, un-used, and un-practiced, leaving the prototypical individual ill-equipped for the challenges arising after retirement and entry to the Third Age. It is well conceivable then that many individuals may have difficulty setting, pursuing, and attaining new goals in an unstructured life phase, and thereby may not be able to fully exploit the potentials for greater self-determination.

Consequences for Heterogeneity and Differential Aging

Another aspect we would like to raise refers to the possible effects of extended life expectancy and few societal regulations in old age on heterogeneity and differential aging. Questions about the extent to which individuals differ from one another in levels of functioning and change over time are at the heart of lifespan developmental research (Baltes, Reese, & Nesselrode, 1977; Hertzog & Nesselrode, 2003; Wohlwill, 1973). One consequence of the scenario sketched in the target article is that, as Freund and colleagues compellingly argue, self-regulation becomes a major driver of development. Another consequence, we argue, is that the aging process should become increasingly heterogeneous. The general idea is that a larger space (extended life expectancy) and more freedom to move around in this space (few societal regulations in old age) allow for many more possible paths individuals can follow. In this sense, life after retirement can be construed as a sensitive phase in which sources of differential development are turned on, added to, multiplied, or diminished (cf. Smith & Gerstorf, 2004; see also Birren, 1959; Dannefer, 1984; Maddox, 1987).

Our concern is that as self-regulatory competencies get increasingly important, primarily the resource-rich segment of the population will have the competencies to fully exploit the potentials for successful aging. In contrast, individuals with poor self-regulatory capacities will not do well. If the authors are correct that with increasing age development becomes more and more aligned with interindividual differences in self-regulatory capacity, then a lengthened Third Age can be viewed as an age-graded developmental task – one that requires additional investment of individual resources and to which individuals bring their own personal life histories and abilities (non-normative factors). Theoretically, then, individuals who enter the task with more resources, including high levels of self-regulation ability, can be expected to do well, while individuals who enter with low ability are expected to do poorly. The consequence is that the lengthening of the Third Age will provide yet one more opportunity to widen the gap between the able and the not so able or between the resource-rich and the resource-poor. What happens to those individuals who do not have, or were not sufficiently taught, the abilities needed for taking an active role in shaping their lives? What are the consequences when individuals fail in the Third Age?

Are the resultant inequities a burden society is willing to bear? We take caution that any expansion of the Third Age applies primarily to the resource-rich. In contrast, for the

resource-poor the Third Age might better remain relatively short – either by postponement of its onset or a hastening of its end. The psychological consequences of failing in the expanded Third Age seem too great and will, by social necessity, likely be avoided. Individuals will continue to work after retiring; laws will be changed to postpone retirement; families will provide central roles for grandparents as caretakers while the current stock of young adults face their own “rush hour”. Unfortunately, we guess that the interindividual differences will not dissipate, rather they will be used to society’s advantage with the resource-poor continuing to work or dying early, and the resource-rich drawing upon their resources and use their “additional years” pursuing and accomplishing personal goals (i.e., positive aging).

Outlook

In closing, we would like to use lifespan tenets about the historical embeddedness of development (Baltes, 1997) to raise additional ideas that may help to put the proposals made in the target article further into perspective. To begin with, we echo the proposal that, relatively speaking, self-regulation may be more important *ontogenetically* in older ages as compared with earlier phases of life and *historically* at the present time as compared with former times. At the same time, we note that the argument of a compensatory relationship between social norms and self-regulation for developmental regulation might also be made for other phases of life (e.g., the recent concept of emerging adulthood; Arnett, 2000). In some ways, it seems that normative expectations that guide and direct the selection and pursuit of goals are becoming more and more scarce at both ends of adulthood. As the demographic changes that accompany the graying of the Babyboomers move forward, we wonder if self-regulation will become increasingly important at all ages, or if societal norms will be re-established for old age (e.g., closing the structural lag; Riley, Kahn, & Foner, 1994).

In sum, we have attempted to supplement the scenario sketched in the target article by making three arguments about possible limits of self-regulation: (1) The potential for self-regulation appears to be considerably constrained by the Fourth Age; (2) self-regulation capacity may be shaped by normative age-graded limitations in the health and cognitive domains that are already present in the Third Age, and (3) the potential social consequences stemming from how interindividual differences in self-regulation might play out in the Third Age. We consider acknowledging these inherent limits a first pivotal step towards better understanding and eventually fully exploiting the potentials of self-regulation for aging successfully. We have enjoyed thinking about Freund, Nikitin, and Ritter’s proposals and exploring the potentials, limits, and consequences of self-regulation, and thank them for furthering our understanding. We look forward to their future work and to the field’s inquiries into what can be done to help and promote peoples selection, pursuit, and attainment of personally relevant and meaningful goals. Adding life to the years gained is a complex enterprise and promoting self-regulatory competencies promises to support this endeavor and help more and more individuals to maintain a life lived fully and with dignity in the face of seemingly inevitable declines.

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